

著・ウスパー

この世界がゲーリードだと 俺だけが知っこい

イラスト・イチゼン



A naked girl has appeared!

The girl doesn't remember anything!

The new heroine is *エヌ

KONO SEKAI GA GAME DA TO, ORE DAKE GA SHITTE IRU

– This World Is a Game, but Only I Know –

- VOLUME 2 -

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この世界がゲームだと 俺だけが知ってる

I am the only one who knows
this world is a game.

Presented by Usber Illustrated by Ichizen
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Omake

この世界がゲームだと
俺だけが知ってる

2

DAMMIT!

HOW
DID THIS
HAPPEN?!

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OOOO

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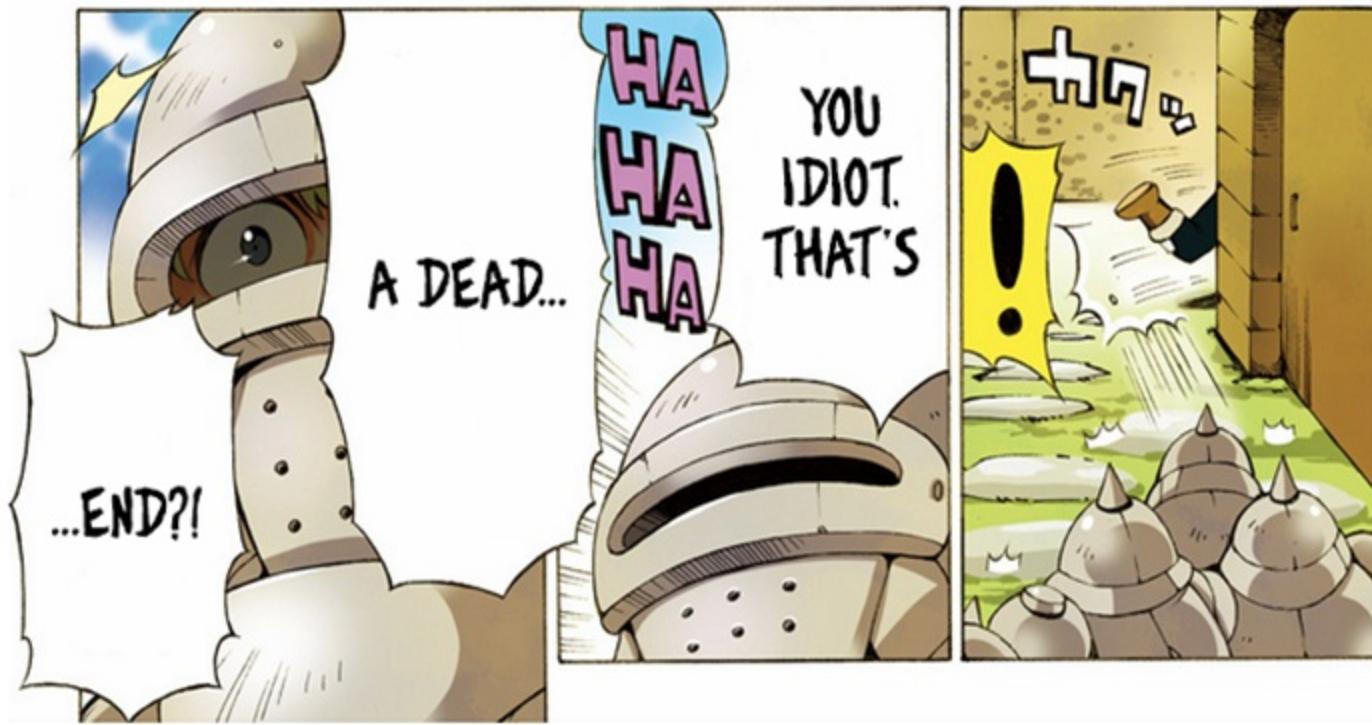
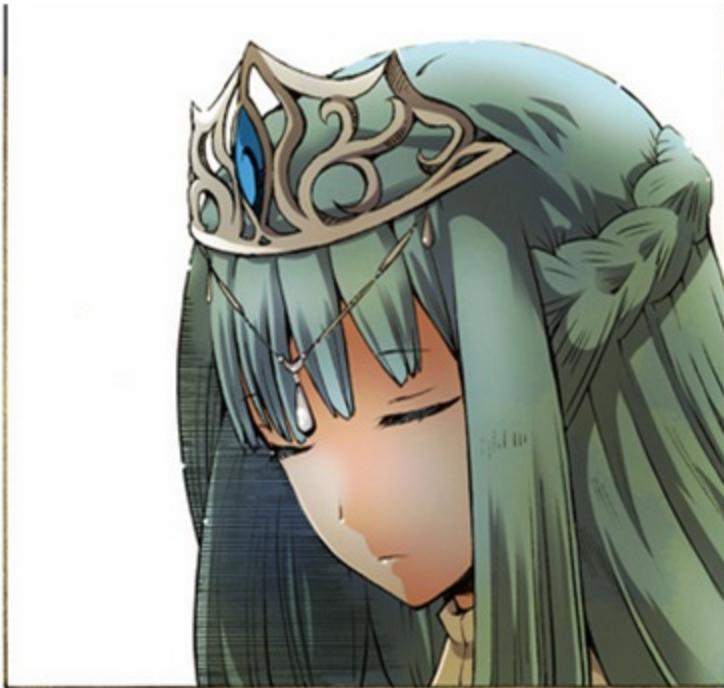


YOU
SUSPICIOUS
MAN!

STOP
RIGHT
THERE
—!!

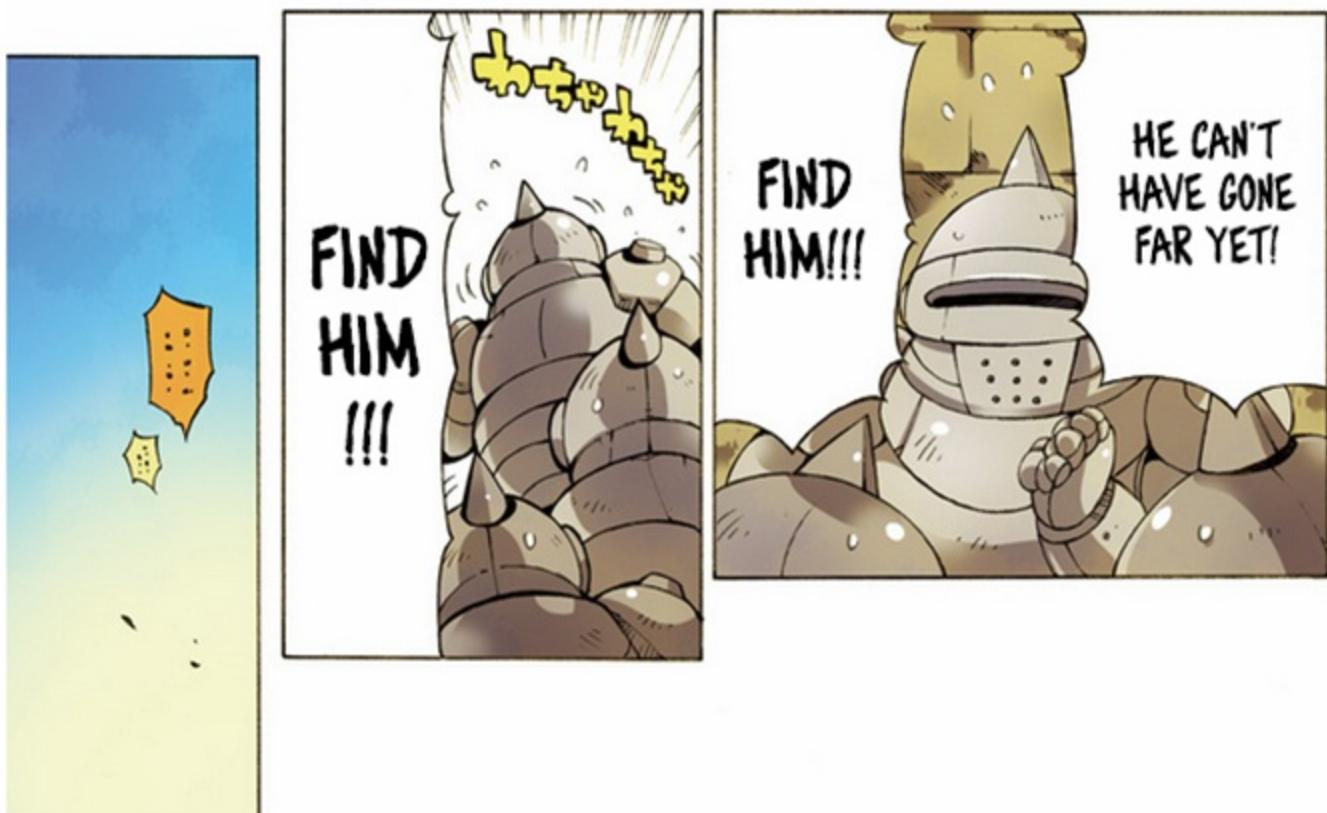


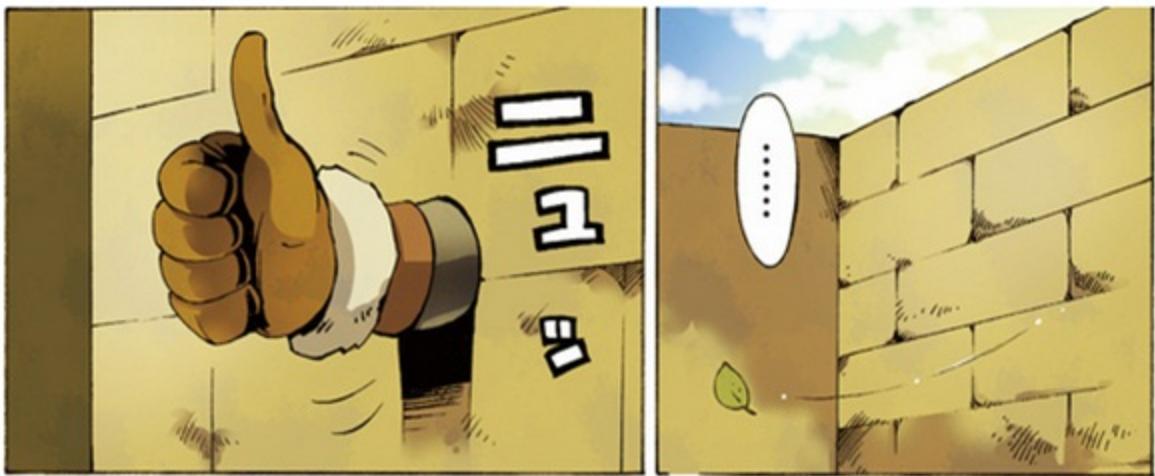






HE'S...







WHY...



IS THIS HAPPENING?





found
you—!!

IT'S ALL HER FAULT!

Prologue

— 1 —

Just six days since I entered the world of Nekomimineko, the shittiest game of the century.

I was in the largest city within the game, the capital Licher, facing the greatest threat of my life.

“Hey, hey, mister. Mister, are you a hero?”

I turned towards the familiar sweet-sounding childish voice, and, as expected, behind me was a small girl that looked like she was in the lower grades of elementary school.

Her appearance seemed harmless, but she was none other than the number one most dangerous character in the capital. She was the very character who had driven countless players to their demise.

(To think I'd become the target of someone this troublesome so soon after making it to the capital!)

But it's not like regretting it would help. I shouldn't have let down my guard just because I was finally able to be alone after so long.

Having disembarked from the Skyboat and smoothly dispatching Hisame, I had been walking around cheerfully, feeling freed from all my problems, but that was a mistake.

As a result of carefreely approaching the front gates, this girl, said to be the capital's very first trial, had locked-on to me magnificently.

Not involved with any events, she was just a mob character whose name wasn't even

known, but she was extremely famous with the Nekomimineko players, as they dubbed her Poison-tan and feared her.

That said, she doesn't suddenly assault players or drag them into unreasonable events. What she does is much more ordinary, much more trifling.

What she does is just – she asks questions.

“Mister, are you a hero?”

Like that.

The question itself was not particularly unusual in any way, and in most RPGs where the player=hero, it was in a way quite a standard question.

The problem was that no matter how one answers this question, she would reply with a response that was *more human-like than a human's*, but which was actually pre-programmed in.

For example, if one answers “Yeah, I'm a hero.”,

“Ahaha, mister, you're so funny! I mean, mister, you're only level forty seven aren't you? You're just a weakling who can't even defeat the Wild Zlimes in the plains, how are you going to defeat the Demon Lord?”

Like so she would slowly chip away at the player's life points.

If, on the other hand, one answers “Sorry, unfortunately I'm not a hero.”,

“Ahh, sorry. Now that I take a good look, mister, your face looks very plain. If someone like you were a hero, I'm sure everyone will be disappointed. I'm sorry for asking such a stupid question.

Like so she would slowly crush the player's heart.

Even if the player answers evasively “I don't know quite yet if I'm a hero or not.”,

“Wow, that's amazing, mister! You're so much older than me, but you can't even answer such a simple question. You're amazing for being able to keep on living so shamelessly, mister!”

Like so she would come stabbing with a knife made of words.

The point is, there was a vast variation in her words, and each time one tries to explain themselves, she would refute them from a completely different angle, making her a very frustrating opponent.

Incidentally, if a player loses their cool and unwittingly tries to strike her, she would counter with an unexpected amount of strength, pinning the player to the ground, and unleash the following.

“Hey, hey. Resorting to violence after losing an argument with a little girl, and still losing and being pinned to the ground, how does it feel? Hey, how does it feel? Hey, hey, tell me, heyy.”

Seriously, rubbing people the wrong way was the only thing that the Nekomimineko staff were top-class in.

Now, to be honest, it's one thing if it were someone straight as an arrow like Train Girl or Hisame, but against her, I, who was not very strong in arguments to begin with, had no chance of beating her with words.

To begin with, just like her namesake, all Poison-tan does is to say some slightly spicy words. If one could just endure that, she wasn't particularly harmful. If one could just shrug off her poisonous tongue as nothing then that was the end of it. But, I didn't really feel like being completely on the receiving end like what I do in the game.

(Luckily, right now, I had a way out.)

The biggest change with the game becoming reality was probably in the behavior of the NPCs. Just like how I was able to obtain the bugged weapon Shiranui without going through the proper procedures, and like how I was able to prepare an environment in which I could use the confession room alone by asking Marielle at the church, or like how I was able to manipulate the method and victory conditions of the duel and somehow avoid Hisame's event chain, if my opponent was a person, then there will be many paths to victory.

Right now, she was not an AI moving based on a program, but an actual living, breathing human with actual intelligence and feelings. Even things that would have no effect back when this was a game should now be effective.

“Hey, hey, mist...er?”

Her words suddenly ground to a halt.

That was because I had held out right in front of her *a certain object* that I had taken out from my bag. Then, wearing the friendliest smile I could form, I spoke.

“D-Do you want a candy?”

I had stuttered a bit due to my nervousness, but this was probably the right choice.

In this world that was both a game and reality, it was possible to make such a choice that didn't exist in the list of choice. If you treat her not as a game character, but just as a precocious child, then the answer would come naturally.

Not by beating her with words, but winning her over with sweets. This was the one and only correct answer that I had come up with.

Her reply was-

“...”

-silence.

Saying nothing, but not taking the candy I held out either, she, who was supposed to be a character more talkative than anyone else, ran towards the gate that was nearby.

Then, she said something to the guards standing by the side of the gate.

Of course, I didn't know anything convenient like lip reading, so I had no way of telling what people far away are talking about.

Still, I wonder why.

At that time, when she pointed at me and said something, I was somehow able to read it perfectly.

“–Mister guard, it's that person.”

I ran away as fast as I could.

“Jeez. That was horrible...”

The diligent guards chased me all around the city.

That said, I was an expert of this town. Places with graphics that looked like walls but could be passed through. The best paths when moving across rooftops. The timing with which large carriages would come through and block the path. Movement routes through buildings that the guards won’t enter. All of this I knew. I was probably more familiar with this city than even those who had been born here.

“Ah! Theree’s the mister!”

At each point Poison-tan was waiting to ambush me, and each time the number of guards chasing me increased. Even then, I did not get caught, but nor was I able to shake them off, and in the end the day had come to an end.

“I have to go home now! ...Let’s play again later, misster!”

Until Poison-tan said that, the game of tag between me and the guards had continued.

After Poison-tan left, the guards also started to disband in small groups. But, after making such a commotion, I probably shouldn’t loiter around the capital for the rest of the day. I made my way to an inn in the southern part of the capital and settled down.

“It’s situations like these in which exploiting bugs was supposed to be helpful...”

Thinking back on the chase scene just now, I muttered.

Filled with problems due to human error, this game Nekomimineko was a treasure trove of bugs. Within those were of course many techniques that were useful for escaping, and there were lots of videos demonstrating these techniques on the internet.

For example, there was a skill called Phantom Mirage, the 8th basic ninja sword skill that one learns.

Skill bugs are generally overlooked and left alone in Nekomimineko, with the Air Jump resulting from the Anakin Skywalker Incident and this Phantom Mirage as rare exceptions, having received a fix in the very first patch. Since Phantom Mirage was quite hard to acquire and also difficult to wield, there wasn't much real use for it, and since its effect and impact was also quite disappointing, it wasn't really very well known on the web, but it did indeed possess a bug with a severe impact on game progression.

This skill repeats the following process many times: teleport randomly to a location within ten meters and launch an attack. As the eighth skill, it was supposed to be a rather powerful skill, but unfortunately it was not very usable.

To begin with, teleporting randomly to somewhere within ten meters meant that unless one was surrounded by enemies, the skill was not likely to hit anything.

It does barely work as an emergency avoidance skill, but since the teleportation was in a small area it couldn't dodge AOE attacks, and depending on the final location, it was possible to end up right in front of an enemy stuck in the after-cast stun, and often one would be unable to immediately tell where they ended up and get attacked during their confusion. To be honest, it really wasn't a very useful skill.

But this skill had an even bigger problem than that.

This skill repeatedly teleports and attacks over a short period of time, which meant that in the span of less than half a second, your view would keep changing rapidly. This was on a completely different level from just feeling dizzy. There are individual differences, but generally, after using this skill, the player would end up feeling very sick.

As for just how bad it was, the grievance and complaints about this skill had almost become a real societal problem, so much so that they had even started slowly fixing other skills with extreme movements. However, some insane person who had continued using this skill despite the problems – actually it's been said that over 80% of heavy Nekomimineko players are crazy, so only a small part are sane like me – had discovered a useful bug.

It was called the Phantom Mirage wall warp bug.

You can probably imagine what it is just by hearing its name. Phantom Mirage was a

skill that repeatedly randomly teleports, but in the end the player will be moved to the position of the last teleport.

Since the only conditions for the teleport locations were that they were located within 10 meters of the initial location and that they were positions where the player would not collide with anything, even if it was an inaccessible area beyond a locked door or an empty area without any way in, it would still be a valid teleport target for the skill.

For example, if you were to stand in front of a locked door and continue to use Phantom Mirage, eventually your final teleport destination would be on the other side of the door, letting you enter an area that you should not have been able to.

In addition, due to the condition of it being where the player does not collide with anything, tragedies like being stuck inside a rock typical of these kind of teleportation skills are avoided, and theoretically, by continuing to cast the same skill, it is possible to return to the original location. As long as one was willing to face feeling sick, it was a bug skill with very little risk.

That said, using this bug to enter a place that should have been inaccessible could lead to further completely unexpected bugs. Due to that, unfortunately, even with how long it took before this bug was discovered, it was quickly patched.

The skill was fixed to return the player back to their original location at the end, eliminating the ability of using the skill to move around. Of course, after the patch the usage of this bug plunged, but until then, many amusing videos abusing this bug were captured and spread on the internet.

Within those videos was one called “The Masked Royal Family of Licht”.

In Nekomimineko, the royal family were essentially event characters only, and whether it was because the staff wanted to give them some special impression fitting for those in the royal family, or if it was because it was too much of a pain to make character events for them, or even if it was due to some un-Nekomimineko-like consideration such as “it would be pretty bad for the royal family to follow the player around in their adventure”, it was not possible to invite them into your party or even to enjoy a normal conversation with them.

In return, they played amazing roles in the events that involved them. In addition to the king of Licht, Fulfil, who exhibited his existence during the few audience events,

the queen Merialda and the princess Shelmia also stood at the forefront of events such as the Royal Capital Invasion, using their exceptional magical talents to bring down a great many monsters. Their mysteriousness heightened by their rarity had touched at many people's heartstrings, with both the queen and princess being regulars on the character popularity rankings. The princess Shelmia had once even contested that Helping Cheeter Mitsuki Hisame for the top spot in the popularity rankings.

In the midst of all that came this video, "The Masked Royal Family of Licht". The royal palace was filled with areas that were off limits, and other than during audiences there was normally no way in, but in "The Masked Royal Family of Licht", at a time that was clearly not during an audience, a room was shown, and in it was the figures of not just the king, but even of the queen and princess who were supposed to only appear during events.

In a location that should not have been accessible, three members of the royal family had gathered. Of course, this was a situation that would definitely not have been seen in normal play, made possible only through the Phantom Mirage wall warp bug.

However, what was strange about this video was not that. In that space consisting of four people including the player, this family did not utter even a single word in conversation.

The king continued to sit all important-looking like he did during audiences on a chair in the room, while the queen for some reason stood still right beside him, and, sitting on a chair across from the king, not blinking even once, was the princess. Well, basically, since the characters were all event only characters, none of their daily conversations or interactions had been implemented, so they were all just doing nothing, but, seeing these noble looking characters frozen there, not stirring or saying anything, was in a way, rather freaky.

The king and the queen, possibly because there's a chance for the player to interact with them during audiences, would move their face along with the player's movements just like Marielle at the Marimite Dojo, but in the princess's case she moved not a muscle.

Honestly. She moved not even a tiny bit. No matter what the player tried to do it didn't matter to her. While their faces and bodies were realistic, the sight of them gazing into the void was quite an oddity.

Well, I felt that the strangest person there was the cameraman who had diligently shot the silent unmoving family for over half an hour, but either way, after this incident there was a commotion on the net over the royal family characters. Especially the princess Shelmia, she received some weird nickname Puppet Princess, and her popularity tanked... is what one'd think, but in some groups it instead climbed rapidly, and in an instant the number of votes for her had far overwhelmed Hisame. That said, soon after there was some drama when it was discovered that she was not a marriageable character and the rankings immediately reversed, but that doesn't really matter right now.

Anyways, like this, there was a big difference in the quality of the AI of Nekomimineko NPCs. Just like how there were characters that were clearly arbitrarily developed like the Puppet Princess, there were also characters like Poison-tan whose intelligent replies made one think "are you sure someone's not secretly controlling this character?".

When someone with an already superior AI like her obtains true intelligence, just how vicious of a person would be born? I can say that today, I had a taste of that with my own body.

If Poison-tan tries to do the same thing again the next time we meet...

"Ahh, let's not think about that."

Thinking about things like that would just make me depressed. For a change of mood, I headed for some tasty food. Luckily, on the first floor of this inn was a bar + restaurant where mostly adventurers gathered and exchanged small talk. I decided to fill my stomach here while killing time with some information gathering.

The topics I heard were diverse, such as the food here is delicious, or some young adventurer named Aberu was annoying, or princess Shelmia was cute, or how the monsters in the Deus Plains were recently, there was no end to them.

At first, it was amusing hearing names and places I knew being mentioned, but put another way any useful information I had already obtained in the game. Cleaning out the plates of food I ordered, I retired early back to my room.

By the way, the rent here was 1000E, double that of the inn at Ramlich. It was quite the rip-off. That said, both the inn owner with the scary face and the worker who was

his daughter Alice both seemed friendly, so maybe it was just a difference in values. Something like a location premium.

Incidentally, I had chatted with the daughter Alice a bit during dinner, and she's an amazingly nice girl. Generally, taking Train Girl and Hisame as examples, there weren't really any good encounters in this world.

I won't go as far as to say that I want some fated encounter like in manga where a girl falls out of a sky or a beautiful girl I crashed into at a corner turns out to be a transfer student or something like that. I would rather prefer having many more normal encounters, where we talk normally and I am soothed by their normalness, just like the encounter with Alice here.

Well, even without Alice, this inn was quite comfortable. While I was in the capital in the game, I thought "it's just a game anyways" and stayed for free in stables and such, so I hadn't ever been in an actual inn before, but this might unexpectedly be a good place.

I once again thought, looking at the room that was one size larger than the one in Ramlich and the bed that seemed soft and clean to the eyes.

"Whew."

Entering the room, I walked unsteadily towards the bed. Like that, I let myself fall forward onto the bed, letting its springiness which was one rank higher than that in Ramlich envelop me.

(It's so, soft...)

For me right now, fighting a soft and fluffy bed would be like trying to face a ridiculously strong enemy. Sleep quickly took over, swallowing me up in no time, as my consciousness sunk into the darkness.

Like this, the curtains closed on the eventful sixth day of my life in the game.

— 3 —

The next morning.

Finding it strangely uncomfortable, I faintly awakened.

But, whether it was still early, or if my fatigue from yesterday still lingered, I found it difficult to move my body. The fresh smell of the sheets that tingled my noses and the cosy feel of the bed were also preventing me from waking up.

(It really is, so soft...hmm?)

I felt like the bed was not as soft as last night.

Actually, it felt very nice and comfortable to the touch, but somehow, rather than a bed, it seemed more alive...

Thinking that, I opened my eyes slightly,

“W-Whaaa?”

and involuntarily let out a voice of shock and awe.

But, that couldn't be helped.

After all...

“W-Who, are you?”

-In front of my eyes, on top of my body, a blue hair blue eyed beauty lay, stark-naked.



Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki »» Is This A Bug FAQ

Q: I walked through a wall somewhere in the capital. Is this a bug?

A: It's a bug. In Nekomimineko there are sometimes objects that were mistakenly not marked as obstacles. Since the AI identifies these as walls, they are very useful for losing enemies. You should proactively run through them! #iminarock

Q: A monster with 0 HP attacked me. Is this a bug?

A: It's a bug. For some reason, when a monster dies in Nekomimineko, the action that it was performing before it died does not get cancelled. It is important to be on your guard until its body disappears completely, but in the chance that you do get hit, try shouting out "Impossible, you should be dead already!" or "Is this... a phantom!". You will surely find it quite entertaining.

Q: In the quest <Rendezvous Under the Moonlight>, Jennifer doesn't show up at the beach no matter how long I wait. Is this a bug?

A: It's a bug. Depending on where the event was initiated, Jennifer may get caught in places such as in the gaps between buildings. The chance that she's stuck somewhere is high, so please go and fetch her. It is quite amusing when the two of you reach the beach and she brazenly asks "Sorry, did you wait long?", even after having escorted her every step of the way.

Chapter 1

The Capital, Lichtel

— 1 —

Even as I asked for her identity, the girl riding on top of me did not answer.

Not only did she not answer, she didn't even twitch. She just silently stared at me with eyes that were the same beautiful blue color as her hair. Her complete lack of reaction was too unnatural, even if she were intentionally trying to ignore me.

(W-What's going on....!?)

Waking up to a naked girl in your bed, what was this manga-like situation? Sure, I did say that I wanted an encounter, but not an encounter like this.

(What am I supposed to do at times like these?)

Showing the bare minimum of respect by averting my eyes from her naked body, I was trying to think up a plan, when,

-Knock knock.

a light knock echoed from the door of the room.

(Not this pattern!)

The timing was the worst. Lying in bed with a naked girl sprawled out on top of me, anyone could see what kind of misunderstandings would be borne from this.

Not to mention that there shouldn't be many people who would be knocking at my door at this time.

Most likely, it would be someone from the inn.

Which means that there was a high chance that it would be Alice, the inn's poster girl

whom I had met yesterday.

(This is bad!)

Scenes from the games and manga I'd seen up till now flashed through my head.

My brain immediately started to boil over,

"I-I'm inside!"

and before I realized it, I had shouted loudly towards the door.

With the wrong words!

I ended up giving my "my stomach hurts so I locked myself in a public toilet when there's a violent knocking on the door to my stall" response. Now I can't even pretend to be out.

There's no helping it now.

I hastily turned towards the naked girl, and gripped her arms. Almost faltering from the extreme softness of her thin arms, I mustered my strength and pulled her body out of the way.

"S-Sorry! But this position is... uwah!"

I was just trying to pull her away, but underestimated my power. The momentum carried us half a flip, and now I was bent over her, pushing her down onto the bed. The feeling of her soft body spread through my whole being, and I felt hot with anxiety and excitement.

Of course, this was not the time to be focusing on such feelings. Perhaps triggered by the sounds in the room, the doorknob cruelly turned.

"Ah, w-wait...!"

My words of protest were in vain, as the door steadily opened...

And on the other side of the door, coming to wake me up, was none other than,

“Breakfast is rea... ah, e-excuse me!”

blushing bright red at the sight of us locked together in bed, the old man who owned the inn.

After chasing down the inn owner, who had immediately run out the door, and clearing up the misunderstanding, as well as reluctantly explaining the situation to his daughter Alice who had come to see what the commotion was about, I was able to borrow some female clothing.

Unexpectedly, Alice was the one who was more understanding and tolerant,

“I know that you’re an adventurer and all, but please don’t do anything weird while staying with us.”

letting me off with just a warning.

It’s just a misunderstanding, but since I didn’t even know what the heck was going on, I wasn’t really able to explain the situation. But well, her reaction was at least much better than that of the inn owner, whose face was bright red the whole time and was more or less useless.

I mean seriously, I really wish that you wouldn’t give such an innocent reaction at your age. If you just went with the flow and said something like “I hope you had an enjoyable night”, then the psychological damage I took might’ve been lessened somewhat.

Grumbling to myself, I returned to my room,

“Wha!”

and found myself speechless.

The blue-colored girl who had suddenly appeared in my room was as I had left her, in other words, stark naked, stretched out on top of the bed.

Shaking off the sudden shock, a question surfaced in my mind.

(Could it be that this girl is actually *not a human*?)

Randomly appearing naked in my room was indeed quite mystifying, but more than that, her reactions, or rather her lack of reactions, hit me with this sense of bizarreness.

I don't know with what purpose she came into my room... actually, if she had a purpose, then it would be even stranger for her not to react when I called out to her.

If her goal was to seduce me, then she would probably make a more aggressive pass, and if that wasn't the case, then shouldn't she be embarrassed to be naked in front of a random stranger?

But she showed neither reaction and, even when left alone, she showed no attempt to cover up her own body, and, in fact, no evidence that she had even moved at all.

(A robot... would probably not fit with the setting of this world, but something like an automata or a homunculus could be possible?)

I approached the bed that she was sprawled over, facing upwards in what could be called a lascivious posture, doing my best not to look at her.

Even then, at times her skin would come into view, causing my heart to beat a bit faster each time, and, while feeling a slight guilt at that, I did reach some conclusions.

(Looking carefully, her body moves slightly in tune with her breathing. She is definitely alive.)

I reached my hand toward her face, which still showed absolutely no reaction even after I had gotten so close to her.

I touched her smooth, porcelain-like skin. Slowly, her body heat transmitted through to my cold fingertip. Her raw warmth as well as the soft sensation felt by my finger made me completely abandon any thoughts of her being a constructed being.

Meanwhile, my hand unconsciously moved along her cheek, passing over her pointed chin, reaching toward the nape of her thin neck.

(Uwah...)

It felt so velvety smooth that I unconsciously let out a sigh. Even then, she showed absolutely no reaction, so much that I even had the thought that she might stay still like this, like a broken puppet, no matter what I did.

Reminding myself that this train of thought was extremely bad, I felt a shiver down my spine.

“She really is alive, right?”

Trying to push aside my indecent imaginations, I muttered to myself.

I had really just said what I was thinking out loud, and had not been expecting any kind of reply at all, but,

“...probably.”

for the very first time, the blue-colored girl moved.

As before, she lay on the bed, showing no signs of getting up or concealing her naked body, but her eyes reflected my figure, hand still stretched towards her, and,

“...I’m probably, alive.”

With a delicate yet clear voice, her mouth moved certainly, forming an uncertain statement.

There was a mountain of things I wanted to ask, but just then Alice came by bringing clothes, so my questions had to be put on hold for a bit.

Glancing from the girl who was still lying bare naked on the bed to me, Alice sent me a look of disdain, but refrained from saying anything.

That is, until she handed her spare clothes over to me,

“I’m warning you just in case. These clothes are brand new, so it’s pointless trying to do anything p-perverted with them!”

she threw those words at me before leaving the room.

I wonder just what she imagined I'd do if I got my hands on her worn clothes.

It seems that she had the impression that I was some kind of huge pervert.

“Like I said, it’s all a misunderstanding...”

While reeling from the shock of the sudden drop in Alice’s impression of me, in order to clear up this misunderstanding I needed to start by questioning this girl in front of me.

But, in order to question her, I needed to get her into a state where we could hold a conversation.

I passed the plain one-piece dress that I received from Alice over to the girl on the bed.

“I’m turning around, so please put on those clothes.”

Saying that, I turned my back to her.

But, no matter how long I waited, I didn’t hear the sound of rustling clothes. Maybe she’s mastered the art of changing clothes silently.

After what I decided as much more than enough time had passed, I tried asking “are you done?”, but there was no answer from behind me.

Could she have gotten up and left?

I started feeling anxious.

But,

“I’m gonna turn around, okay?”

when I asked again,

“...mm.”

a short reply came.

It was just a small whisper, but I felt relieved.

Man, trying to communicate with her is quite the tough task, I thought as I turned around, and found myself speechless.

What do you know! There, in front of me, was a naked girl who had received Alice's clothes and magnificently transformed into a naked girl!!

“–You didn't change at all!”

I ended up shouting out of exasperation, but the blue haired girl's expression did not flinch one bit, as she held out the clothes in her hand towards me.

“...How do you wear this?”

Her words sounded like a bad joke, but it appeared she was being serious.

It seemed that she understood the concept of clothes, but the knowledge of how to wear them was curiously missing from her head, so she really did not know how to wear a one-piece.

I tried telling her to pull it over her head and put her arms through the holes, but it wasn't getting through to her. Finally, I ended up half-closing my eyes and helping her put it on from behind her.

(I-I'm so tired...)

It was just a few seconds, but it was my first experience with both female clothes and with putting clothes on a female. I was starting to be overwhelmed with mental fatigue, but this was just the prelude.

Gathering my emotions and concentration, I turned to face her.

(Mm, this is...)

Distracted by her being naked, I hadn't been able to look straight at her before; for the first time I was able to get a good look at her.

Her long blue hair that reached her waist and clear blue eyes that seemed almost transparent were especially eye-catching, but even without them she was quite the beauty.

Her thin figure was lacking in sexiness, but in return it was beautiful like a piece of artwork.

(She has to be an important character, right...)

Oh, and just for the sake of my dignity, I'll have you know that I wasn't carefully inspecting her body out of a sense of lust. Important characters, namely those filled with the devotion of the producers, have more effort put in their design, and as a result the chance of them being good looking is higher. This means that in Nekomimineko, if a character was good looking, then it was very likely that they had some important role in the game.

And, if she was one of the main characters in Nekomimineko, then I probably, no, I definitely would remember her... I'm pretty sure.

(I feel like I know her... but it feels like something just doesn't quite fit.)

I felt like I'd seen her many times before, but I couldn't clearly recall any of it.

(Oh well.)

There was no helping what I couldn't remember. While I felt a bit uneasy about this, I decided to ask her directly.

“Please answer my questions as best as you can. If you don't know then you can say that you don't know, and if you don't want to answer it then just say so too.”

“...Mm.”

She gave a small nod in response.

Seeing her respond honestly lifted a small weight off my chest.

I decided to proceed with the strategy of starting off with some harmless questions and slowly advancing to the heart of the matter.

In which case, the first would have to be...

“First of all, what is your name?”

“...I don’t know.”

A stumble right out of the gate.

Ah, but there might be circumstances behind her name that she didn’t want to tell anyone.

Something even more harmless than asking her name would be,

“Uhm, then, how old are you?”

“...I don’t know.”

Her age was also off-limits.

Wait, could it be...

An unpleasant possibility entered my mind, and I started firing off questions in rapid succession trying to refute it.

“Th-Then, your level?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Your favorite weapon?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Your favorite skill?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Then, what about your sex?”

“...Female. ...Probably.”

“Where do you live?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Where is your home town?”

“...I don’t know.”

“What are your parents like?”

“...I don’t know.”

“What’s your favorite place?”

“...I don’t have any. ...I think.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

“I want to eat some fruits.”

“Why did you come into this room?”

“...I don’t know.”

“When did you come into this room?”

“...I don’t know.”

“How did you come into this room?”

“...I don’t know.”

“...VR, logout, order, have you heard of any of these words before?”

“...No.”

“What’s something interesting that happened recently?”

“...I don’t know.”

“What’s the name of the god that this country worships?”

“...Redistas?”

“What year is it?”

“...I don’t know.”

“What’s the name of the king of this country?”

“...I don’t know.”

“What’s 345 squared?”

“.....119025.”

This girl calculates so fast! But that’s not what’s important.

(Just what is up with her...)

If she wasn’t lying to me, then that would mean that she didn’t know much about herself at all.

At least, the only things I was able to learn from the questions were that she was female and liked fruits, and also that 345 squared was actually quite a surprisingly large number.

If it’s like this, there’s nothing I can do.

If only I could at least learn her name, was what I had begun to think, when,

“...Ah.”

I finally realized that I had forgotten about the existence of an important item.

Sticking my hand into my bag, I pulled out a bundle of paper strips.

This was indeed the important item that I had just remembered, the Status Sticker.

If I use this, then I should at least be able to find out her name and level.

“Do you mind if I use this?”

I asked, and she nodded without hesitation.

Trying not to surprise her too much, I slowly applied the Status Sticker on her arm.

Words appeared on the strip of paper.

Feeling relieved that finally I was going to be able to find some leads on the situation,

“What the heck is this...”

I involuntarily let out a groan when I saw what was written on the paper.

This was one thing that I hadn’t expected at all.

Double checking my eyes, I once again read over the letters on the Status Sticker.

【 * エ # * # ※ & • * ヽ • % ※ * エ @ : LV 1 】

She, was bugged.

(Wait a moment, then, just what is going on?)

Holding the clearly glitched Status Sticker in front of me, I fell into a state of confusion.

Until just now I thought that this girl had appeared due to some kind of event. After all, it was a standard theme in games to have an amnestic girl suddenly appear by the player.

But if she was bugged, then that changes everything.

Thinking about it again, in the Nekomimineko game, it wasn't possible for a character to become fully naked. In which case, an event where a naked girl appears in front of the player could not possibly exist.

Well, there is the possibility that she appeared at my location due to some event, and then some bug happened afterwards that made her naked.

(But wait, maybe I should be thinking about it the other way instead.)

She might've ended up coming here because she was bugged.

For example, if, due to some sort of bug, she had been ejected from the system, and as a result of that was sent to the single irregularity in this world, the player... nah, no way.

Ejected from the system by a bug? The player is an irregularity? These are all thoughts that humans, that beings with consciences, would come up with.

But for a game program, no matter how much creative decision making it seems to be able to do, in the end it's just a program.

There was no way that Nekomimineko's system would be able to make such a decision, especially since there wasn't any kind of special AI system built into it. The only reason that this world didn't seem like it was running off a program was because of the power of the Lucky Mallet or whatever, which mashed the game together with reality. The fuzzy parts of this world were all due to the effects of Maki's wish, so it was hard to imagine that such a far-fetched chain of events could be caused by a bug in the game

- something that's a part of the game system.

At the very least, there weren't any cases in the game itself where something would bug out and suddenly warp to the player.

(So was it due to her own will that she appeared in front of me? But that's also a bit...)

It seems that the heart of the matter would be in why she appeared in front of me.

If she had become bugged after coming into my room, then it's possible that we would never find out the reason.

Even then, I continued questioning her, and was able to get a clearer picture of the situation.

She had absolutely no memories about herself, and was barely equipped with bits and pieces of common sense. She only had clear memories since a few hours before I had woken up, and at that time she was already lying naked on top of me. Normally in that situation you'd think one would scream or at least take some sort of action, but it seems that she spent those few hours until I woke up just looking at me.

There were countless things wrong with that situation, like, did you not think about getting some clothes to wear first, or like, weren't you surprised at all suddenly finding yourself in a strange place, or like, had you not considered waking me up and asking about the situation, and like, is it that interesting staring at someone's sleeping face for a few hours straight? But even if I tried asking,

“...?”

she'd just tilt her head perplexedly.

It seems that she could not understand what the point of my questions was at all.

I wonder if this was also an effect of the bug. There were a ton of other things that I wanted to ask her as well, but it didn't seem like I would be able to get satisfactory replies.

Just what do I do about this. While I was thinking hard in front of the silent girl,

“...Huh?”

suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, she collapsed.

“H-Hey! Are you okay!?”

As I hurriedly rushed over, a low rumbling echoed out from around her stomach area.

“Don’t tell me... Are you just, hungry?”

I inquired, and, lying still, the blue-haired girl tilted her head forward slightly.

Crunch... crunch...

It seemed that there was no doubt that the girl had collapsed because of hunger. The blue-haired girl was single-mindedly... actually, with a slight fervor, she was focused seriously on eating the apple that I had managed to find downstairs.

Fortunately, I didn’t need to explain to her how to eat things. Whether it was within the bit of common sense she knew, or whether it was just survival instincts, she was slowly but surely munching away the mass of the apple I brought her. Was it because of her upbringing that she wasn’t voraciously devouring it, even having collapsed from hunger? But I also felt that it was probably just a matter of her personality.

“So, um, is it good?”

I asked, and, while continuing to bite off small pieces of the red fruit, she vigorously nodded twice. It was hard to tell since she showed no emotion at all, but it seemed as though she really liked it.

(Seems like an apple was the right choice.)

Though she said that she liked fruits, she didn’t say anything specifically about apples. Though other things probably would’ve been fine as well, when I saw this red fruit placed on the counter, it just hit me that this was it.

Mysteriously, I was able to easily imagine her eating an apple, and for some reason it seemed like an extremely fitting image.

“As I thought, apple really suits you.”

I accidentally said it out loud, and immediately thought “does that make any sense as a compliment?”, but it didn’t seem like she had paid any attention to it. She didn’t even turn to look in this direction, continuing to nibble away at the apple at the same pace.

(Still, what do I do about this...)

Just who was she and why was her info bugged? I had absolutely no idea, and there were surprisingly few hints available. I couldn’t even begin to figure out how I was supposed to figure out this mystery.

But, I had no intention of just leaving her like this. I don’t mean to boast, but it wasn’t a stretch to say that bugs were my area of expertise. And also...

“Hey. Sorry to tell you, but you can’t eat that part...”

There was no way I could leave someone with this little knowledge of the world by herself.

Looking at her, still emotionless but with tears in her eyes trying to gnaw at the apple core, that’s what I ended up thinking.

I had only brought her 2 apples, but it was apparently enough to stave off her hunger for a bit.

Having recovered and able to move again, I took her along out to the streets to ask around and see if there were anyone who recognized her.

“So, um... ah. First of all, what should I call you?”

It was quite inconvenient without a name. It’s fine even if it wasn’t her real name, I needed a way of referring to her.

After thinking about my question for a bit,

“...Ringo.”

the girl answered.

Why she chose a name that meant “apple” was what I had wanted to ask, but then I remembered how she stared regretfully at the apple core that she had to throw out. It seemed that she had really taken a liking to apples, but was it really proper to decide on a name just like that?

“Are you sure? Even if it’s a fake name, it’s still your own name, so if you want to think about it a bit more...”

I tried to get her to reconsider, but she gave a small yet firm shake of her head. She might be quite a stubborn one.

Well, since she was the one that decided it, she can’t complain about it afterwards.

Having decided on the girl’s name, we resumed the plan to find out more about her in the city.

To start with, I asked the inn owner and Alice about the girl, about Ringo, with the idea of clearing up the misunderstanding at the same time.

“Have you seen this girl anywhere before?”

The inn owner answered seriously, and Alice, while wearing a look of “what are you playing at”, still answered properly.

But, the conclusion was that neither of them recognized her at all.

If she were a famous character, then even if they hadn’t met her before they should still recognize her.

The chance that she was an important character dropped slightly.

Also, since either Alice or her mother was watching the entrance to the inn at all times, how Ringo managed to sneak in had also become a question.

There’s a chance that she entered through the window, but the possibility that she warped here due to some bug might no longer be a fantasy.

“Now then, where should we go?”

Bidding goodbye to the two of them, we exited the inn, but I didn't have any specific destination in mind.

With the current goal in mind, I decided to go around asking everyone on the street.

Of course, to a former loner, calling out to random strangers on the street was quite a high hurdle.

Even then, I tried my best to persevere, but...

"Ah, hello there, have you seen this girl anywhere before? A-Ah, she's cute? Thank you very much. See, I found this girl sleeping naked in my bed this morning, and I don't remember at all how it got that way, so I was wondering whether you have any... wa!? Why are you running away!"

As expected, my loner aura was preventing me from having a proper conversation, since pretty much everyone ran away in the middle. But, luckily, or maybe unluckily, I was able to tell from their reactions that none of them knew Ringo.

It was obvious when I thought about it. If she was so famous that random people in the streets would know her, there was no way that I wouldn't know her. I had better prepare myself for a drawn-out operation.

I looked over at Ringo. She was absentmindedly staring off somewhere. If an out-of-control carriage were to come flying towards her, it seemed like she wouldn't react at all and would just be crushed like a sitting duck.

(Though I have no intention of getting her mixed up in battles, it's probably a good idea to buy some armor for her anyway.)

While it was relatively safer in the city, this was Nekomimineko after all. There was more than enough danger everywhere.

There were still battle events that took place in the streets, and there were countless cases of pinpointed harassment where vases and such would suddenly come falling from right above you. And there was even a bonehead adventurer in this world who would mess up the cancel for a weapon skill in the streets and cut down innocent people passing by. ...Mm, I had immediately reset after that, but it still left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Ringo, let’s take a break from asking around and buy some equipment for you. Okay?”

I looked Ringo straight in the eyes for confirmation, and,

“.....Mm.”

after a long pause, she nodded.

It seemed like she had come to a decision after thinking long and hard, but I wouldn’t be fooled.

(She’s completely forgotten that Ringo is her name hasn’t she!)

Glancing back at her, following behind me with the same unchanging expression as always, I secretly heaved a deep sigh.

“Ringo! This way, not that way! Ringo!”

We had decided to head to the armor shop first, but along the way Ringo exhibited her personality to the max.

How should I put this. She doesn’t do anything that she’s not specifically told, and even when given directions, if they weren’t precise enough, she would continue to trip over bumps in the road or walk straight into obstacles and walls without a second’s hesitation.

It felt like I was playing a war simulation game while leading around an extremely dense friendly character. No matter how many times I warned her, it didn’t help, so I gave up and grabbed her by the arm.

It was all a big pain, but considering that it was only until we figured out her identity, I was able to somehow endure it.

“But what should I do if we don’t figure out who she is?”

In the capital with a recommended level of 50, she was merely level 1. Though as a level 13 I wasn’t really in the position to say anything, but given how she’s been, it seemed like it’d be impossible to get her to a level where she’d be able to survive as a solo adventurer like Train Girl.

(It could also be that she’s actually quite strong, but her level was just reset because of the bug.)

I don’t know what character or what level she was originally, but there was a chance that the rest of her parameters weren’t affected, and only her level had dropped. Thinking that, I studied Ringo, walking beside me.

But even before I could get a sense for whether she was strong or not, I felt a vague something tugging at my mind. I was almost certain that I had seen her somewhere before. Just why was I having such a hard time remembering it?

Putting that thought behind me for the moment, I peeked at her face, trying to figure out what she was thinking about right now, but all that greeted me was an

expressionless face.

I say greeted me, but she wasn't even looking at me.

While Hisame was expressionless and stoic, Ringo's was of a completely different type. Hisame was expressionless because she didn't show her emotions, but Ringo was probably expressionless because she didn't really feel any emotions to begin with. Hisame chose to ignore people even while acknowledging their existence, but it was as if Ringo was ignoring the existence of other people itself.

I don't know which is worse, but it might not make a big difference either way.

“Oops, almost passed it.”

While having rather rude thoughts, we arrived at the armor shop. It had a magnificent storefront, incomparable to the one in Ramlich.

Luckily, I had some money to spare. I still had some of the earnings from Ramlich left.

After two large expenditures, 50,000E for the Skyboat ticket to the capital and just short of 50,000E for the staff at the magic shop, my savings had dwindled quite a bit, but I should still barely be able to afford somewhat decent armor for two people.

There's no way one could expect to survive in the battles ahead with only equipment bought at Ramlich, a beginner town. Though I had bought a ton of accessories so my defense would be boosted by quite a bit, it was like a drop in the ocean compared to what I needed. I even remembered having gone to the lengths of stuffing pieces of paper in the cracks of the armor, but in the end I doubted that would increase its defense.

Consulting my wallet, it seemed that I needed to take some care in choosing the armor. While going around the store comparing the items on display with the spec sheet in my brain,

“...I-Impossible!”

I spotted an incredible item in a corner, and hurriedly rushed over.

“T-There's no mistake!”

There, was a piece of equipment that would cause any Nekomimineko player to drool at the sight of it, one that could only be obtained from the randomly-changing Lucky Jackpot. It was a rare equip that had high defense and magic defense, and harbored a stealth stat that was one of the highest in the game.

The Lucky Jackpot system randomly cycled between items from each store's Lucky Jackpot List, so something that was on display today might not be on display again tomorrow.

(I-I...)

Gulp, I swallowed.

Based on its shape, it resembled a robe that a magician might wear, but it was a much more modern piece of clothing. It was one of those everyday items that sometimes made it into fantasy games like these, completely disregarding background settings: a raincoat.

Because of that, never mind the shape, its material was quite unique. It was made out of something that was half transparent like vinyl, and while just barely, I was able to somewhat make out the shape of the wall through it.

Both the sleeves and the coat itself were long, so just this by itself was capable of protecting the entire body. But, putting it another way, it meant that it wouldn't be possible to put on any other equipment while wearing this, but right now I was quite strapped for cash so that'd actually work out for the better.

I looked back and forth between the price tag and the amount of money I had. This would use up almost everything I had.

(I have no choice, do I.)

After all, this was the only chance I had to buy this, and I had a responsibility to buy Ringo a proper piece of equipment. That's why, even if it would be a bit tough, I had no choice. That's right.

I grabbed the vinyl-like raincoat and headed to the register.

“Welco...me...”

The female clerk that greeted me looked from me to the item in my hand, then over to Ringo, and finally back to me.

Receiving the merchandise from me, she said with a stone-cold voice.

“...One ero-raincoat. That’ll be 100,000E.”

(I, did it...)

When I came back to myself, holding the ero-raincoat that had just become my possession, I glumly hung my head.

In this game, there was no way for a character to become completely naked. You couldn’t mess with someone else’s equipment, and even if you could and removed all of their equips, items called inners would still remain, so they would not be fully naked.

However, certain items were more risque than inners, and while they were equipped, those inners would not be, resulting in a state that was closer to being naked than equipping nothing. Of those lewd equipments that were every man’s dream, one of them was this, the ero-raincoat.

This raincoat was made with a half-transparent material not for self-expression but rather for the stealth stat. The stealth stat from clothing was, well, to be blunt, how transparent they were. And this raincoat had quite a high stealth stat, defending against gazes only about as much as steam from a bath.

In addition, while it was longer than normal raincoats, it still flipped easily, making it quite a high-level item that even manics hold in high regard.

(There’s just one problem...)

I stole a glance sideways at Ringo.

“...?”

My gaze fell on her innocent-looking eyes as she just happened to be looking this way, and I felt myself being crushed with a sense of guilt.

I had somehow ended up buying this out of habit, but I wasn't rotten enough to be able to force an actual person to go about their everyday life wearing something like this.

Since I had already seen her naked... I mean, since it was a limited-time item I went ahead and bought it, but that didn't mean I had been planning to make her wear it. I'm serious. I swear I'm not lying.

Still, it might not be that much of a problem. This world wasn't just a game.

It was possible to become naked in this world, so the reverse must also be possible. Basically, if she wears it on top of other clothes then everything would be fine.

"Hey Ringo, this is an armor... ah, I mean, a piece of clothing, called a raincoat. Could you try wearing it? I bought this for you."

Making sure to put it as simply as possible for Ringo to understand, I suggested to her. Hearing that, Ringo tilted her head a few millimeters.

"The ero-ra—"

"It's called a raincoat! What a weird name!"

I yelled out, covering up Ringo's words, and shoved the raincoat to her.

"It has a weird name, but a high defense! So, won't you wear it?"

I pushed hard, and after thinking silently for a bit, Ringo pinched the clothes she was wearing.

"...More than, this?"

"Of course! This raincoat has a hundred times, no, more than a million times more defense!"

The one-piece dress that Ringo was wearing wasn't armor, so it had a defense of zero. Zero times anything was still zero, so I wasn't lying.

As if feeling the persuasiveness in my words, Ringo stared at me, and, after a bit of time, lowered her eyes and gave a small nod. Seeing that, I relaxed.

“See, this is how you put it on.”

Before she could say that she didn’t know how to put it on, I demonstrated in front of Ringo. It was a bit of a tight fit above my suit of armor, but I smoothly put my arm through the raincoat.

“...Okay.”

Perhaps feeling nervous about doing something she wasn’t used to, like changing clothes, Ringo assented in a stiff voice, receiving the raincoat from me.

And, while I thought she was going to equip it on the spot...

“...Ah, change room.”

She muttered, as if having just remembered something, and started to look around busily.

It seemed that she had remembered me desperately telling her “girls shouldn’t be changing or getting naked in front of people!” back at the inn.

...Though it was a bit of an overkill just for throwing on a raincoat, Ringo did finally manage to remember my words, so it was probably best to follow her wishes. Making a request to the young lady that handled our purchase, we were able to borrow a change room.

The clerk was quite hesitant to lend us the change room just to put on a raincoat, but when I told her that it was the first time Ringo had made a request by herself, she happily complied.

While Ringo was putting on the raincoat, the clerk and I waited together at a slight distance to the change room.

There, the clerk spoke to me.

“...I’m sorry, I might’ve misjudged you slightly.”

“Eh?”

I turned to look at her with a surprised expression, and she leaked a slight laugh.

“At first, when you bought that raincoat, I thought you were a pervert trying to trick an innocent girl... but you’re actually quite caring.”

“Ah,ahaha...”

I laughed dryly. So she had indeed thought that way.

I had somewhat suspected it, but being told so directly was a bit irritating. Also, the fact that she thought that was just misjudging me *slightly* meant that she was probably still misjudging me.

Looking at my shocked reaction, the clerk gave an elegant smile, and walked energetically towards the change room.

“Are you done?”

Acting like an employee of a clothing store, the clerk called out towards the curtain, and a short “...nn” came.

“Then, I’m opening it!”

Accepting that response, the clerk pulled the curtain to the change room fully open...

“...Huh?”

It was fully open. Well, actually, it wasn’t completely fully open, but it was almost fully open.

Inside the change room was Ringo, having perfectly put on the transparent raincoat, and at her feet, in a pile, was her one-piece... wait, why did you take th-



“NYAAAAAAA!!”

Before I could figure out what was going on, the clerk pulled the change room’s curtain shut with full force, shouting what seemed to be something in between “kyaa” and “gyaa”.

Then, while quietly trembling, she slowly swung her gaze towards me.

“...Dear customer? Can I have a shoooort moment?”

As I winced at the female clerk approaching with ominous footsteps,

(...Its defense was lower than steam)

was what I thought.

After explaining Ringo's unique situation and fiercely pleading that I had no idea she had been planning to strip, I was somehow able to resolve the misunderstanding, but then she started interrogating me on why Ringo had been *wearing nothing except for the one-piece*, and in the end I was put through a horrible experience.

“Listen here, this isn't something you can just shake off by saying that you didn't mean anything bad. Do you want me to go have a chat with the guards?”

“Eh, guards...?”

“The guards in this city are quite scary. I heard that yesterday they chased around a lolicon who was trying to abduct a little girl for more than half a day.”

“...I-I'll take note of that.”

It's not like I could just go and say “oh, that was me”. There wasn't anything I could do but to gloomily let her words flow past my ears.

After the clerk finished lecturing me, she brought Ringo to the back of the store, and after more than half an hour finally came out.

Having returned, Ringo was properly wearing the ero-raincoat on top of her one-piece. With this, her defense stat should have gone up by quite a bit.

“For that girl's sake, I won't charge you for *anything other than the raincoat*.”

I couldn't tell looking from the outside, but from the words that the clerk whispered to me so that Ringo didn't hear, her defense inside the one-piece should have also gone up by quite a bit. I was really thankful for it.

After Ringo and I paid our respects to the clerk, we left the store.

“It seems you two spent quite a long time talking. What were you talking about?”

Increasing her defense was one thing, but if Ringo had been taught anything weird, I'd have to make sure to correct that.

I asked as soon as we left the store, and, surprisingly for her, Ringo seemed to be thinking deeply about it.

Finally, after a while, she solemnly opened her mouth.

“...About, eros.”

“Huh?”

“...I learned about eros.”

RINGO has leveled up!

RINGO has gained 4 points in INT!

RINGO has gained 2 points in SELF-DEFENCE!

RINGO has learned EROS!

“...?”

Having escaped from reality for a moment due to the completely unexpected answer, I came back to find Ringo tilting her head.

As I thought, she had been taught something weird, but this was, well, a completely different vector of weird from what I had imagined.

“A-Ahh. Good for you.”

As someone unfamiliar with these things, that was the only way I could respond.

That clerk was probably trying to teach the all-too-defenseless Ringo all sorts of things so that she would learn to be cautious around men, but I don’t think it worked too well.

But, the person in question, while emotionless, seemed to be quite satisfied,

“...Mm. Being naked, is, erotic. But, fanservice, is also, important.”

not forgetting to review what she learned. How diligent.

Oh, and when I heard the word 'naked' the shocking scene I witnessed this morning resurfaced in my mind, so I subtly faced away from Ringo.

While there had been many unexpected surprises, in any case, we were now done with the problem of Ringo's armor. The Shiranui I had was also stronger than any of the weapons sold here in the capital, so my weapon was not a problem. I had wanted to put on something that was a bit better than the mithril armor I was wearing, but because of the ero-raincoat I was out of money.

“...Maybe I'll go sell some weapons.”

I had bought up all the weapon types in the store in Ramlich for the sake of my pride, but thinking about it carefully I didn't need another sword and dagger since I had Shiranui and the Wakizashi. If I sold the redundant sword and dagger, combined with the money I had left I should be able to afford at least the lowest-grade armor sold in this city.

But, it would be kinda awkward to head directly to that shop right now. In any case, I'll first go to the weapons store and sell my unwanted weapons. Then, with that money, I'll have a fresh start.

At least, that was what I had planned...

“I, did it again...”

A few minutes later. Leaving the weapons store, I sunk to my knees. I was supposed to secure money for buying armor by selling weapons, but for some reason I fell into the vicious cycle of buying more weapons.

It would be one thing if this were a game, but such hasty decisions in this world could lead to my life being in danger.

I'm sure I was aware of all that...

“But, but, this was also a Lucky Jackpot...”

There was no use crying over what I had already bought.

In the very worst case, there was still the option of sacrificing Mikhael... no, I doubt I could do that now that this world had become reality, and if I just went and completed

a few quests that could be done inside the city then it'd probably all work out.

By the way, I had bought a total of two weapons. The first one was a dagger called the Heat Knife.

It was not very strong, but it had a fire attribute – an elemental weapon. I should probably raise my mastery level by using this for a while.

I passed the Wakizashi that I had been using as a sub-weapon until now to Ringo. While I wanted to avoid any situation where Ringo would have to fight, I didn't see any harm in having her hold on to it for self-defense.

The other weapon I had bought was a Lucky Jackpot like the ero-raincoat, and Nekomimineko's leading fashion item. It was a pure black pouch with one large hole and five small holes. It was, what was called the Fingerless Glove.

Leaving the store, I quickly tried putting it on.

“Guu! My right hand trembles!”

Getting a bit carried away, I ended up saying something like that idiot magician Sazaan.

How's that, I turned backwards as if to say,

“...”

but Ringo seemed to be emotionless. Her lack of reaction hurt my chest. It might be just my imagination, but I felt like she was criticizing me.

“...I can, too.”

“Huh?”

But, the Ringo who I thought had no reaction suddenly muttered something and, turning her back to me, started moving in a light run.

Nothing like this had happened before. I found myself reflexively chasing after her, but not even a few steps away, in front of the entrance to an alleyway, Ringo stopped.

There, as if showing off the ero-raincoat, she spread it open with both hands.

“Ohhh!”

The wind that came blowing through the alleyway caught her clothes. The transparent raincoat danced in the wind as the skirt of the one-piece fluttered. Standing in the midst of that, Ringo seemed just like a bird flying through the sky.

...It pains me to say this, but she was kinda cool.

Seeming satisfied, Ringo trotted back to me, and with a bit of pride seeping through her emotionlessness, she inquired.

“...How was it?”

Of course, the answer was obvious.

Even with the loss of her memories, Ringo was at least a few levels higher than me as a chuuni performer. She must have been loved by the god of chuuni since birth.

It was slightly frustrating, but I had to admit it. Just as I was reluctantly about to give her my words of praise,

“...Was it erotic?”

“I’ll apologize a hundred times, so could you please stop talking about eros!!”

an unexpected knife of words caused me to lower my head with full force.

...The atonement for the indiscretion of youth that was the ero-raincoat might have been a bigger burden than I had anticipated.

Having been brought back to myself by Ringo’s words, I quickly took off the Fingerless Glove and threw it in my bag. As I calmed down, the realization that I had been doing some pretty embarrassing things came rushing over me.

...Mm. To be able to make someone as level-headed as me do something like that, this Fingerless Glove must possess some sort of mysterious magic that’s not reflected in its stats.

That said, please don't misunderstand.

At first glance, this Fingerless Glove looked just like a plain, normal, fashionable fingerless glove, but it was a unique weapon with a unique property. ...While it was a rather unique weapon, it was definitely not a unique weapon, so don't get that mixed up.

Anyways, would you believe it, out of all the weapons this was the only one where even if you equip it, your power doesn't change at all compared to being bare-handed!

Some might think that this was true for knuckles as well, but that's false. While having knuckles equipped meant that you could still use bare fist skills, the offense stat of the knuckle is reflected in the attack, and you also became able to use knuckle skills. Only with this Fingerless Glove were the damage calculations and usable skills exactly the same as being bare-handed.

Then why bother wearing that thing, why not just go and use your fists?

I had also thought that.

It was a mystery why the Nekomimineko staff made an item like this, but there was probably some cursed-eye type chuuni patient in the staff. W-Well, I don't expect to be using this glove either, but being a Lucky Jackpot it was pretty rare, and it had a super reasonable price of 200E. I just somehow ended up impulsively buying it.

(Mm, I guess I should go join a guild after all.)

Looking at all these weapons that I had bought, I was involuntarily feeling the urge to customize them. I didn't have any money left for buying armor anyways, so we called this the end of our shopping trip.

Thus...

“Hey Ringo, let's go check out the Fighters' Guild next.”

Organizations called guilds existed in Nekomimineko, and a variety of merits could be obtained by joining them.

The more well-known guilds were ones like the Fighters' Guild, the Magicians' Guild, or the Bounty Hunters' Guild, and by joining one of them you gained the privilege of using its facilities.

Of those facilities, the ones of special importance were the Workshop and the Laboratory.

The Workshop in the Fighters' Guild allowed for equipment customization, and the Laboratory in the Magicians' Guild allowed for magic customization.

For the battles in the later half of the game, customization of equipment and magic was crucial.

While there were branches of the Fighters' Guild and Magicians' Guild in each town, joining a guild could only be done in the capital, so players who arrived in the capital would almost definitely make a trip to one of the guilds.

That was not all that you gained by joining a guild. By completing various events and quests, you could rise through the ranks of the guild.

Doing so, you could obtain many limited or special event reward items, and could experience the peculiar scenarios that each of the guilds had prepared.

There was actually a lot of content in these guild events. If the main storyline counted as 10, the various guild event lines would have a volume of 4 to 7. What's more, if you followed the guild event chains until the very end, there were even unique endings that awaited you.

The events were also quite high quality. I was clutching my stomach with laughter as I played through the Fighters' Guild's last event "The National Musclefication Plan", and had felt a slight chill down my spine as I played through the Magicians' Guild's last event "The Great Purge", where the entire city was extinguished after being caught up in the guild's inner conflicts.

But, in either event, there was a fatal flaw where after a certain point everyone other than fellow guild members became broken, making it impossible to progress in the main story. I really don't understand who in their right mind would give the go sign to these events, but if not for that, I think these guild events would've probably gotten much better reviews.

After all, finish the Fighters' Guild event chain and almost all the main characters devolve to saying just "me, kill enemy", and finish the Magicians' Guild event chain and the capital gets devastated.

There's no way you could continue the main storyline under those situations.

That said, I did think that the way they fixed it with the first patch, where after the player reached the end of the event it was revealed that it was all just a dream, returning the player to before the point of no return, was a bit too irresponsible.

Of course, such a deus ex machina received a vigorous backlash from users, and in the end, it became possible to select a command "Revert Guild Event" from the menu screen after reaching the end of the guild event, resetting all of the effects of the guild event while keeping status values and such the same.

But on the other hand, that meant that now, when I couldn't open the menu screen anymore, I wouldn't be able to use that to reset the effects of the event, so getting too involved with a guild could become dangerous.

Still, there were probably no real problems with joining just to use the facilities.

And, having played through many times, I'd completed the event to join the guilds many times. The quests to join either the Fighters' Guild or the Magicians' Guild were not that hard, and there shouldn't be any particular difficulties, even for someone low-leveled.

"Let's go in, Ringo. I'll ask around about you as well."

After confirming Ringo had nodded as usual, I opened the door decorated with the emblem of the Fighters' Guild, a pair of crossed swords, in a laid-back manner, and opened my eyes wide in surprise.

Why? Because on the other side of the door was a super handsome, golden-haired guy,

“Yo, you look like a born fighter! Keep this just between the two of us, but you, I’ll give you the special honor of defeating the Demon Lord together with me!”

...who had suddenly called out to me, but whose face I didn’t recognize having seen in-game even once.

(What... is going on?)

I looked, bewildered, at Mr. Handsome in front of me.

I had confidence that I’d encountered pretty much all of the NPCs in Nekomimineko in the game before.

Of course, there was the possibility of some unknown character hiding in some minor event or in the far reaches of the land somewhere, but this was the capital, and this was a super conspicuous handsome golden-haired guy. There was no way I could’ve missed someone like him.

To begin with, running into him at the Fighters’ Guild was already baffling.

Having visited the headquarters here countless times, I was sure that I had at least committed to memory all of the characters who would come here. The guild didn’t have an event like this, and didn’t have a character like this.

Could he also be a bugged character like Ringo? There could be some kind of abnormal situation happening right now, causing this world to start diverging from the game.

I made sure to keep my guard up as I approached Mr. Handsome.

“Uhm, you are?”

Making sure to hide Ringo behind my back just in case, I warily asked for his name.

To which Mr. Handsome replied by exaggeratedly brushing his hand through his hair:

“Oh sorry, how rude of me, my name is Alex! The man who will soon be known as the great hero that defeated the Demon Lord, Alex!”

“Wha...!”

I found myself at a loss for words.

Alex was the name of that NPC who famously went on a kamikaze mission at the start of the game.

While there were reports of sightings where he had somehow survived due to some kind of bug, and there were probably videos of him that could be found, I had not seen any of them.

So, if this man were indeed Alex, then that would explain why I didn't recognize him...

(But, what's the meaning of this?)

Alex was supposed to launch a raid on the Demon Lord and die immediately. That was the normal flow of things.

But today was already the seventh day in the game. Normally, he should've already launched his attack on the Demon Lord's Castle, or rather, the attack should've even been wrapped up by now.

"Hmm, what's this? Could it be, hearing my legendary name has made you nervous? Or did the thought of the great task of defeating the Demon Lord make your blood run cold? Don't worry. I can defeat the Demon Lord just by myself. You only need to come along on my journey as [a fighter in the hero's party]."

Um, you'd die by yourself, actually.

Retorting in my mind, I started to ponder. From his behavior, it didn't seem like Alex was fundamentally different compared to the game.

The only difference would probably be this fixation on finding a party member?

"So, you're planning to defeat the Demon Lord?"

"Naturally! Who else could fulfill this grand duty except me, the hero Alex!"

Um, you die instead of fulfilling it though.

While retorting once again, I was still completely lost. From all of these overconfident assertions, no matter how I looked at it, his modus operandi was the same as in the

game.

But in that case...

“So why haven’t you left to defeat the Demon Lord already?”

The moment I asked that question, color drained from Mr. Handsome’s face.

The suspicious archaic smile that he wore until now disappeared, replaced by a somewhat fearful expression.

“A-Ahem. Just a few days ago, that had been my plan. But, well, I got some, um, friendly advice, and uh, changed my strategy a bit...”

“Friendly advice?”

Does that mean there existed in this world someone rational enough to stop this suicidal hero?

Though I couldn’t imagine any kind of logic working on Mr. Handsome here.

In any case, my doubts were quickly washed away.

“It was right when I was about to leave the capital to defeat the Demon Lord. A small girl had run up to me. I thought she had come to cheer me on, but I was wrong. That girl had come to ask me questions.”

Eh? It couldn’t be...

“She came to ask me whether I was a hero, you see.”

Oh god, I sighed in my heart. I could already see where this was going.

“I answered that of course I was a hero, but the girl said that wasn’t a funny jo-joke, that a he-hero was supposed to be smarter, that in the first place it was strange to call myself a hero when I don’t even have a single ally, that it seemed like I was going to be surrounded and killed by small fry before even making it to the Demon King, or that I-I was spouting n-nonsense without having any proof, she was just i-insulting me so much that I...! Th-That’s not it! I wasn’t trying to be violent! I j-just wanted to stop her so I grabbed her shoulder... eh, how am I feeling right now? N-No, th-that’s not, I-I’m

not feeling excited about being humiliated by a young girl stepping on me...!"

He seemed to have gone into some kind of a trance and even begun a dangerous confession, but that was more than enough for me to understand.

-As I thought, the culprit was Poison-tan!

Well, everything makes sense now.

The silver-tongued Poison-tan easily talked down this muscle-brain, who on top of all that even lost in power, ending up sprawled on the ground with his confidence shattered. Trying to cover up even one of the flaws that Poison-tan had found, he put his efforts into trying to gather allies.

Just like how the helping cheeter Hisame had taken requests from people other than me, the player, the people in this world were performing actions for other people that they used to only do towards the player.

While I had also met quite the handful from Poison-tan, her poisonous tongue had ended up saving a life, so just this once: good job, Poison-tan.

And even though I'd never seen the hero Alex before, I had quite an interest in his character. If he was saved, then that should be something to be happy about.

"W-Well, enough about that. In the end, I realized what I was lacking. So, how about it? Would you like to..."

"I decline."

But, this and that were, of course, different matters.

I had finally managed to shake off Train Girl and Hisame, and be alone.

So I had no intention of joining some strange party right now.

"W-Wait! To balance our party, we need a fighter and a monk! You don't have to do anything except follow along!"

"That's not my problem."

Until now, I had somehow managed to watch myself and respond politely, but my real thoughts finally leaked out.

“Wh-What don’t you like about this offer? I don’t mean to boast, but I’m level 200. Compared to any other party, ours...”

I couldn’t even endure listening to this anymore.

“I just remembered that there was something I needed to do. Excuse me.”

“Wha-! Wait! Wa-”

Shaking off Alex as he tried to hold me back and grabbing the hand of Ringo, who was staring intently at the back of my head for some reason, we left the Fighters’ Guild.

“Man, Alex sure has fallen.”

After arriving outside and making sure that Alex wasn’t following, I muttered to myself.

To begin with, the reason I had liked the Alex in the game was because I felt a connection with him, challenging the Demon Lord alone even though he was no match.

Whether in games or in real life, it was true that there was strength in numbers. If everyone had the same abilities, then it would be much easier to accomplish something with three people than with one.

This was true even in Nekomimineko. Even though allies in Nekomimineko were about thirty times more likely to sabotage you than in a regular game, travelling in a party still significantly reduced the difficulty compared to travelling alone.

I had understood that, and have accepted it.

—But, to face those challenges head on, and to confront the Demon Lord alone, isn’t that what being a true hero was all about?

I wouldn’t go as far as to say that you’re not a hero unless you fought alone; I had no intention of renouncing those heroes that fought together with their allies.

But someone that could be swayed to look for allies by crazy notions such as “you’re not a hero if you don’t have allies”? I’d never join their party.

If anyone tried saying something like that to me, even if I were crushed by everything else they said, I would definitely make them take back the words that “you’re not a hero if you’re alone”.

That’s called the pride of a solo player.

...Well, you could also say that I got fired up feeling like he had dissed being a loner.

“Still, this means that we’ll probably have to avoid the Fighters’ Guild for a while.”

Alex was probably staking out the Fighters’ Guild, where lots of fighters visit, because he needed someone who was a fighter. It was a very elementary thought process, but it was actually not a bad choice. If he were planning on sticking around until he found someone, then it was probably correct to assume that troublesome things would happen if I went there in the next while.

“Sorry about that Ringo, running away before we even had a chance to ask about you.”

Turning around and apologizing, I saw her looking at me with blank eyes. I thought it might’ve been the case, but it seemed like she had indeed been staring at the back of my head. She was emotionless as always, but looking at those eyes I was sure.

...She definitely wasn’t listening.

Well, if she didn’t mind it then that worked out for me. I wouldn’t need the weapon customizer until I obtained something better than Shiranui either, so there was no reason for me to force myself into the Fighters’ Guild right now.

Not to mention that there was another guild with useful facilities in this city.

“...We’re here.”

The Magicians’ Guild. In front of the doors with a mark made to represent a magic circle, I took a deep breath.

The Magicians' Guild event was slightly more twisted than the Fighters' Guild one. Of course, having complete knowledge of the contents, I shouldn't have any difficulty with it, but now that the game was reality there was no guarantee that something irregular like before wouldn't happen again. I also needed to make sure that Ringo didn't get lured into developing in strange ways.

“Ready?”

Checking with Ringo, I once again braced my heart.

This time I wouldn't let down my guard. Hardening my resolve to deal with whatever might happen, I opened the door,

“...Huh?”

...and came face to face with a steel-gray colored piece of metal.

As if noticing me standing there frozen, the only piece of flesh showing, a mouth, started to spew words at me in a rather high-pitched voice from the bottom part of the piece of metal.

“Welcome! Rejoice, for the greatest fortune in the world has descended upon you. For you have the honor to meet me, wielder of the most terrible magic in the world, harboring the darkest of darkness in his right hand, this extraordinary genius magician—”

I wordlessly shut the door.

“...Phew, that was close.”

Now that I think about it, I felt like there might've been a strange magician named Sazaan wearing an exaggerated steel mask like that who spewed exaggerated speeches and blew magic everywhere without caring about allies until his MP ran out where he started whining and when everything went well he would only boast about himself but when the going got rough he immediately started complaining and clinging onto the player, or there might not have been.

No, I didn't remember any of that. I absolutely didn't remember any of that, but I felt like that stupid magician's home base was the capital or something...

“...Are we done?”

Having no idea what had just happened, Ringo asked with the same blank expression as always.

“Yeah, we’re done.”

In many ways.

For now, let’s just act like we saw nothing. Thinking that, I tried to urge Ringo to leave, when,

“Come back here! Why did you close– kyaau!?”

The door seemed like it wasn’t shut properly, so I reflexively closed it again. It felt like the other side of the door had hit a nose or something, I wasn’t sure if he was okay.

“H-How dare you! I won’t forgive you, open the door!”

But it seemed like I didn’t need to worry. With that lively voice, the door started to open again, so I unhesitatingly pushed it shut.

“Hey, why aren’t you letting me open the door! D-Damn it! Don’t underestimate me! If it’s come to this, I’ll turn you into ash together with the door!”

Along with that ominous declaration, I heard the sound of a spell starting to be chanted from beyond the door.

(Oi, are you serious!)

I immediately took my hand off the door and, pulling Ringo’s hand, started running.

Watching out for the magic that was about to come flying out was... of course, not what I was worried about. This door to the Magicians’ Guild had anti-magic capabilities built in. Any normal spell was just going to be bounced back.

In other words, firing a spell at something like that was...

“Bloom, crimson lotus–gyaaaaa!! Hot hot hoooot!”

Of course that was going to happen.

While wincing at the annoying, rather high-pitched scream coming from inside and sympathizing with the people in the Magicians' Guild who had gotten caught up in it, I grumbled.

“Now I can’t go to either the Fighters’ Guild or the Magicians’ Guild...”

I could have headed over to the other guild, the Bounty Hunters’ Guild, but with this rush of strange encounters, if I went there now and the Tea Drinker or the Rose Piercer was waiting, then it would’ve really been too dreadful. And unlike the other two places, the Bounty Hunters’ Guild wasn’t something that you joined, so since I had no intention of taking on a quest there was no problem waiting until tomorrow before going.

Since I was out of money, I couldn’t go to any stores. Now that I couldn’t go to any guilds either, there was only one more place where I could go to gather information.

“Let’s go somewhere you might enjoy next, Ringo.”

Announcing that, I pulled along Ringo, whose expression hadn’t particularly changed at all, and quickly strolled towards the center of the city.

Chapter 2

The Day A Dream Came True

— 1 —

The capital, Lichtel, was the largest city in the Kingdom of Licht that Nekomimineko was set in.

Many people lived in the capital, and many pieces of information gathered there. And of the entire capital, the place where the greatest amount of information gathered, was here.

“Fresh vegetables! Buy them while they’re fresh!”

As you could tell from the voice, it was the produce stand.

It was as you would expect from a fantasy world, selling potatoes that were heavier than elephants and turnips the size of houses... just kidding, it was nothing more than your average produce stand, but the lady there was a bit of a gossip. If you weren’t careful around her, you’d find yourself listening to stories about her neighbours for two hours straight, but it had also become common sense in Nekomimineko that if you were broke and wanted to find out something in the capital, then you should first ask her.

Surprisingly, this produce shop did quite well, and depending on the time there could be an endless stream of customers making it impossible to gather information, but luckily there was almost nobody right now.

This was my chance. I glanced back at Ringo, and asked in a small voice.

“What’s your favorite fruit or ve-”

“Apple.”

It wasn’t just an instant response, she responded before I could even finish my

question. With a dry smile, I walked over to the stand. As I stopped in front of it, the lady raised an eyebrow at me.

“Hmm? Haven’t I seen you somewhere...”

Crap. Now that I thought back, I felt like I might have run into this stand and scattered apples everywhere yesterday when running away from Poison-tan...

Whoever moves first wins! Before the lady could remember, I raised my voice and shouted.

“I’d like an apple!”

“That will be 50E!”

Whether due to her nature as a salesperson, or due to the effects of the game program, the lady forgot her suspicions and sold me an apple. Mission success.

To buy something random before asking for information was also standard procedure in the game.

Receiving the apple in exchange for 50E, I turned towards Ringo behind me.

“Here you go.”

I reached my hand out to give her the apple, and froze.

(What...?)

I felt an intense déjà vu, at a level that I’d never felt before.

The clamor of the streets. The voice of the produce stand lady promoting her goods. A girl with blue hair and blue eyes looking up at me hesitantly. And myself, holding an apple towards her.

—I felt like this has happened before.

It felt like I was about to remember something, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. Frustration stirred my chest.

Seeing that I wouldn't take my hand off the apple no matter how long had passed, the blue haired girl tilted her head. Then, Ringo's mouth moved.

“...Want to split it in half?”

I've definitely seen those lip movements before, I've definitely heard those words before, I-

“Shall we split it in half?”

“A-AAaaaaAAAAAAAHH!!”

I let out a loud scream that was enough to startle Ringo.

With what I was sure were bloodshot eyes, I scrutinized the girl in front of me from head to toe.

“...Y-You can, have the bigger half.”

She might've been scared by my sudden aggressiveness, saying something like that, but thoughts like that didn't even make it into my mind. Forcing the bright red fruit into her hand, I used my freed hands to tidy up her hair.

After straightening her wild hair in the back, I clasped my hands together and pressed them against her forehead to at least recreate the shape of a tiara.

When I did that, what emerged was...

“Princess, Shelmia...”

It was the face of Nekomimineko's pride, of the super popular character Shelmia.

What decided it was the situation where she received an apple in front of the produce stand.

Of course I had thought that an apple suited her. In the few events involving the princess, there was one, The Princess's Holiday, which contained a scene where the player presents the princess an apple.

While a single apple hadn't been enough to draw the connection, by walking around town as just the two of us, going to the produce stand and handing her an apple – by putting together all of these conditions, I finally noticed it.

–Now, everything made sense.

Not knowing how to put on clothes, not caring about being naked, not moving at all if not spoken to, those were not because of a bug, but because of the princess's special AI setting.

After all, it was an AI that gave her the nickname Puppet Princess, where she wouldn't move at all outside of events.

If that was faithfully recreated, then it wouldn't be strange at all for it to end up as something like this.

The reason I felt like I recognized her, but couldn't tell for sure, was because she wasn't wearing a dress like usual, and didn't have the tiara that she always wore on her head.

But there's no excusing myself from being called a slow-witted Nekomimineko player for not realizing it until now, though in contrast with Princess Shelmia's popularity, she actually only very rarely appears in-game.

It's really not my fault for not being able to remember what she looked like, I made an excuse to myself.

Towards Ringo, no, Princess Shelmia, who was silently nibbling away at the apple, I called out.

“I've figured out who you are.”

“...?”

That seemed to have caught her attention, as she raised her head.

“You see, you're actually, this country's...”

I started to speak, then stopped.

(Wait, a moment...)

It's true that I've figured out her identity, and that explains her abnormal lack of common sense, but that had no connection at all to why her name was bugged.

In game, Princess Shelmia just didn't have the thought patterns for everyday life installed in her; she wasn't bugged.

To begin with, if Ringo were Princess Shelmia, why would she appear in front of me?

There wasn't any event where the princess would go visit the player.

And in the first place, why wasn't there any commotion in the city if the princess disappeared from the castle?

(I have a bad feeling...)

That's right, that wasn't all.

Princess Shelmia was, after all, a member of the royal family.

While someone like me, who had only played the game, might not have noticed it, there's no way that the people on the street wouldn't recognize the princess of their own country.

“S-Sorry! Give me a moment!”

The sense of discomfort and unease continued to build.

For some reason, I felt like I had missed something big.

“E-Excuse me!”

I hurriedly rushed over to the produce stand, and tried asking the lady about the princess.

“I have a quick question. Have you heard any strange rumors about Princess Shelmia recently?”

Hearing my question, the lady glanced at me with a blank look, and immediately asked back in a threatening voice.

“Hunh? Who?”

Could it have been rude to suddenly bring up the royal family?

I was feeling an immense pressure on me, but I tried asking again.

“Um, like I said, Princess Shelmia. Have you heard like if she was bedridden or if she hasn’t been showing her face recently or anything like that?”

“Dunno. No idea.”

I tried my best to find something out, but the reply was curt. From the looks of this, it would be difficult to find out anything.

I was about to end the conversation there, but...

“Who’s Shelmia anyways? Was there a princess called that in the countries around here?”

The words that followed caused a shiver to run down my spine.

While it might’ve been possible for someone else, there was no way that a gossip like her wouldn’t know the princess of her own country.

The ominous premonition within me grew all the more.

No, I shook my head.

There’s definitely some kind of mistake.

Thinking that, I desperately tried to string together words to explain.

“W-Who? You know, the princess of this country. The only daughter of the king...”

But, I was ruthlessly interrupted by her furious shout.

“What are you talking about! There’s only one princess in this country, and her name

isn't anything like Shelmia!"

Impossible words erupted out of her mouth.

That's right, it was impossible.

There was no way I would misremember something so basic about Nekomimineko, and with this world based on Nekomimineko, there was no reason for there to be such a big difference like the princess's name being different.

Even then, even then I asked.

"Then, what, just what is the name of this country's princess?"

After looking at me suspiciously, "You really don't know?", she answered.

"-Princess Maki El Licht."

My head felt like it had been hit by a hammer.

(What did she just say?)

My brain refused to process those words.

There was no character called "Maki" in Nekomimineko.

There shouldn't have been.

So why?

Why did that name sound oddly familiar-

Before I realized it, I was imagining an absurd possibility-

Cold sweat wouldn't stop dripping down my back.

As if coming to deal the final blow while I was shaken, the lady started speaking to me.

“You seem pretty surprised, and I don’t know why you thought that, but the princess had always been...”

“That’s, wrong.”

But I involuntarily spoke over her.

“...That’s wrong. She’s not, the princess.”

By that time, I already had what was probably something closer to a crazy thought than a hypothesis in my head.

Caught up in that thought, I unconsciously muttered out loud.

“...Even if you say that, like I said...”

The lady started to say something again, but it wasn’t entering my ears anymore.

A princess, yet not a princess.

Not a Royal Princess, but a *Princess*.

“In that case...”

When did this happen?

Yesterday, when I was snooping for rumors on the first floor of the inn, I’m certain *I had heard the name Princess Shelmia*.

In that case, there’s only one possibility.

It must have happened between last night and today, within the span of half a day.

With that, I was almost half certain.

I had no evidence whatsoever.

But, everything lined up too perfectly to call this just a coincidence.

“It probably happened this morning.”

Ringo, aka Shelmia, had said that she had come to my room a few hours before I woke up.

If it were a few hours before I woke up, couldn’t it have actually been at midnight sharp?

No, that must have been when it was.

I had no idea if *that* was actually going to do anything.

But, it would seem like *that* had ended up activating when the date changed.

“Today is...”

The seventh day of my life in a game.

And, the first day I entered this game, was July 1st in the real world.

In other words, what it means is that, if that’s the case, then today is-

“–Today is, Tanabata!”

I thought back to the day when I was sent to this world.

While it felt like it had been an eternity, only six days had passed.

The reason I ended up in this world was because my cousin Maki had made a wish to some strange tools she found in the storage that I should “just go live in a game”.

While it hadn’t been on purpose, I admit I may have done some things that had hurt Maki’s feelings, but leaving that aside, I thought a bit more deeply about what happened during that time.

Maki didn’t find just a single strange object in the storage.

There were the seven balls that would grant any wish, the mummified monkey paw that would grant three wishes and a lamp that seemed like it might contain a genie, as well as the Lucky Mallet that sent me to this world.

And in addition to those, there was one more thing that Maki had found there.

Exactly, it was the long, thin strip of paper that seemed insignificant at first glance.

The Tanzaku used for Tanabata.

It would be quite dubious to call it something that can grant wishes, but if the Lucky Mallet were real, then it wasn’t impossible that the other things had the power to grant wishes as well.

On that day, Maki said she wrote on the Tanzaku wishing to be a princess.

Of course, nothing happened, and so until now I had thought that Tanzaku didn’t have any special powers after all. But, what if the timing just wasn’t right on that day?

What if on Tanabata, that is, today, her wish to become a princess were to be suddenly granted?

—Wouldn’t it be possible to imagine that Maki had become a princess in this world, Princess Maki El Licht, ousting the real princess, Shelmia, from that seat, causing her

to show up in front of me?

Of course, this was just arbitrary speculation, leaving unanswered questions such as why Maki ended up being a princess in this world out of all of the possibilities, why becoming a princess meant that the original princess had to be replaced, and why, instead of just disappearing or taking on another role, Shelmia ended up in front of me in a bugged state.

But, even taking into account all of those peculiarities, it still didn't seem like an unreasonable hypothesis.

It was a bit too much of a stretch to say that everything happening around midnight on July 7th was just a coincidence, and honestly, I couldn't think of any other situation that would cause a bugged Princess Shelmia to suddenly appear where I was.

“You've been muttering to yourself for a while now, are you okay?”

The lady at the product stand called out to me, and that brought me back to my senses.

I turned my focus away from my thoughts and back to the real world.

“Y-Yeah, sorry. Actually, I just came to this country recently, so my memories are a bit jumbled right now. The princess of this country was Ma... Maki, right? Have you heard any rumors about her?”

Noticing that the lady was starting to look at me like she were looking at someone suspicious, I hurriedly composed myself. While it didn't seem to have cleared up all her doubts, her love for talking prevailed.

As if having forgotten all about my strange behavior, she immediately started talking about the princess.

“You see, even someone like me hasn't heard much about Princess Maki at all. I mean, those people in the royal family, they hide in the castle year after year and hardly even show their faces. Dear me, make sure not to tell anybody that I said these things.”

“Ahaha... Thank you.”

Letting the conversation flow past me, I thought.

If Maki did take over as the princess, then that must have happened this morning.

There's no way that troublemaker would obediently stay in the castle for days on end, so if there haven't been any rumors then it would be natural to think that she had only just come here.

I next turned my thoughts to what her position was in this world.

I was unsure if she had inherited all of the flags and abilities related to the princess, and how much effect game events would have on her. In my case, most of the system restrictions that existed when I was playing the game had no effect.

For example, I was able to dig through the ground where Thief Melipe's Legacy was buried without having to clear the event flags, and even in the middle of cutscenes where the game puts you in spectator mode and doesn't allow you to move, I was able to move freely in this world.

Since Maki was not an NPC from the game, it was possible that, like me, she would not be limited by most system restrictions. But on the other hand, the worst possibility where her personality and memories have been altered to be the same as the princess in the game was not outside the realm of possibility.

In either case, it seemed that everyone other than Maki would likely behave similarly to in the game, which would make it extremely difficult to approach Maki.

There really were very few opportunities to see a princess who doesn't come out except for events.

But if this Princess Maki were really the Maki that I knew, then I definitely needed to meet her and have a talk with her. But it's also true that, if everything just progressed as the game would, there would be a very small chance that Maki would be exposed to danger.

There shouldn't be any situation outside of the Royal Capital Invasion event that could cause any harm to the princess.

So time was still flexible, I thought.

No matter what Maki's status was, I wanted to find some hint of a way to return to the real world before an event where I could talk to her happened.

If I were the only one to disappear, then, well, some people might be sad, but I feel like there wouldn't be much of an impact, but if Maki even came to this world then everything was different.

Compared to me, who was just a loner, Maki probably had lots of things that were left behind in that world.

While she was a hopeless cousin who would stick to me and order me around at every opportunity, I wanted to be able to at least send her back to the real world.

“Ugh...”

Thinking this far, I hit upon an unpleasant thought.

If I wanted to prioritize returning, then the correct way to proceed would probably be to go meet “that person” again.

While I didn’t like the thought of that, if it had come to this then I might as well...

(No, wait a second)

There was no point even if I went now.

I mean, to travel together with “that person” with my current statuses would be way too dangerous.

“...Calm down, calm down.”

There were too many things I needed to do that I ended up confusing myself.

I had to focus on what needed to be done first and what I could do right now.

“...Ah.”

It was only when I started to calm down that I noticed the girl standing idly a short distance away, holding an apple core.

(What am I doing...)

Yes, figuring out what to do about Maki was definitely important. But my priorities

right now shouldn't be myself or Maki, they should probably be this girl right here, who had lost everything due to Maki's wish.

"Um, Shel... Ringo."

I started to say Shelmia, but quickly corrected myself.

At least until I taught her the truth, she was Ringo, not Shelmia.

"I've figured out who you are. And... do you want me to tell you?"

Wanting to be as forthright to Ringo, the girl who had been ejected from this world, as possible, I asked while looking her straight in the eyes.

"....."

For a short while, Ringo said nothing.

Even though the boisterous sounds from the surroundings continued to enter my ears, there was a silence between the two of us which overwhelmed all that. Somehow finding that silence hard to bear, I spoke some more.

"Well, I know who you are, but the situation is slightly complicated, and it might be quite difficult to return you to where you belong. But figuring out who you are might be something important to you, so..."

However, the words that I desperately tried to force out were powerless in the face of the silence.

Those superficial words were swallowed by the silence, leaving me with no choice but to close my mouth and wait for Ringo's reply.

Time passed as we merely stared at each other.

Even the gradually increasing commotion in the background didn't bother me. I just single-mindedly stared at the blue-colored girl in front of me, waiting for those lips to form a word.

Unexpectedly, Ringo averted her eyes as if she were starting to feel uncomfortable. She looked around with unrest, then looked back at me, and slowly murmured.

“...I can’t, be here?”

Those words, for some reason, stabbed deep into my heart.

It was the first time that Ringo had expressed any kind of unrest.

...Actually, thinking about it, it was possible that Ringo had always just been hiding her unrest. Losing all her memories and not knowing anything about herself. The person beside her wasn’t an acquaintance from before she lost her memories, but rather me, who ended up cooperating just from going with the flow. Anyone would feel anxious in a situation like this.

But, instead, I had used her apathy as an excuse, never bothering to even imagine what she might be thinking.

My chest burned with guilt. Feeling like I had to do something about it, I grasped Ringo firmly by the shoulders.

“What are you talking about! Ringo, it’s completely okay for you to be here!”

It was possible that she had thought I was trying to get rid of her by bringing up this topic. She might’ve imagined that, by telling her who she was, I would then leave her by herself.

Seriously, what I am doing. Getting over-excited about things like investigating the truth or finding an explanation for everything, and forgetting all about the girl trembling at her own helplessness beside me.

“I mean, I can’t promise that I’ll always be looking after you. But I would definitely never say that you can’t be here!”

I didn’t know how I could support her. But, with as much ardor as I could muster, I tried to express my desire to help placate her unease as much as I could.

Slightly, very slightly, Ringo’s eyes seemed like they had opened a little wider in surprise.

-It felt like my feelings had been conveyed.

Ringo looked up at me, as if she were smiling at me.

“...Mm.”

And she gave a nod that was a few microns in size.

It was a face that I had gotten completely familiar with in the last few hours. But, there seemed to be a tinge of happiness on that face, or perhaps that was just what I had wanted to imagine.

However, that illusion immediately vanished, and Ringo returned to her usual emotionlessness as she asked.

“...Is it, really okay?”

Does she have such little trust in me?

Feeling like I should say it more clearly, I was about to open my mouth...

“...The line is, very long.”

“Eh?”

I finally noticed the snaking line that formed behind us.

“H-Huh? Could it be...”

A line of customers who couldn’t finish their shopping because we were standing here?

Which meant that, could Ringo have been asking about whether it was okay to be here since there was a huge line forming...?

I whipped myself back around and looked at the lady at the produce stand again, and she was looking at me with a toothy smile like that of a carnivorous beast.

“I didn’t want to interrupt, but could you take your youthful drama somewhere where you won’t bother the store?”

...It looked like that was the case.

"I-I'm sorry!"

I yanked on Ringo's arm with a force that seemed like it might pull her arm out of its socket and escaped at full speed.

My reply had been cut short by the strange misunderstanding, but it wasn't a topic that I could just go back to after a break.

I decided to return to the inn and have lunch with Ringo first, then go up to the room and explain everything to her.

"The sun's still so high and they're already..."

As we were about to enter the room, I saw Alice trembling from shock for some reason, but I decided to pretend that I didn't notice it.

"So, to start with, let's talk about why you're missing your memories..."

Talking about how this world was a game or how I had come from a different world would probably just make everything too complicated.

It would probably be simpler if I kept the wish-granting items as being things in this fantasy world.

I explained to her that my cousin had used an item that supposedly granted wishes and wished to become a princess, and that because of that there was a possibility that Shelmia, who was originally the princess, had become dislodged and sent to where I was.

Focusing on only the important points, there wasn't actually that much to talk about.

Regarding her former self, I tried to describe everything that I remembered, but she had surprisingly little reaction.

Finally starting to become anxious about her lack of reactions, I tried to turn the conversation over to her.

“So, that’s basically what I know. Is there anything you don’t understand or anything you want to ask?”

It wasn’t clear even if she had heard my question or not, as she continued to stare into nothingness without any signs of a response, until...

“...Name.”

Still not moving even slightly, finally, she muttered a single word.

“Name?”

I unconsciously asked back, and she gave a subdued nod.

“...You still, haven’t told me.”

They were her first words in a while, but I couldn’t figure out what the contents meant.

I had already told her many times that her real name was Shelmia...

“Ah, did you mean, my name?”

When I said that thought out loud, she gave a small nod.

Thinking about it, I might not have properly introduced myself to her yet.

It’s true that I had been caught up in thinking about the unexpected situation, but this was just a straight blunder.

“Sorry, my name is Souma Sagara.”

“.....”

However, even as I announced my name, she still didn’t show any kind of a reaction.

Even though she asked about it, it didn’t seem to mean anything.

(Ah, talking about names...)

Her former name was Shelmia El Licht.

What showed up on the Status Sticker was “*エ#*#※&・*b・%※*エ@”, so the number of letters fit.

(I wonder if the result will be different if I use the Status Sticker on her now.)

From a game's perspective, from a computer program's perspective, having the data for a name change based on the person's own perceptions was something that seemed unthinkable.

But in this world that was a strange mix of digital and non-digital, I felt like there was a possibility that the bugged data could be overwritten by her acknowledging something as her own name.

“Can I check your name one more time?”

With high expectations, I asked for her permission and placed the Status Sticker on her arm.

The results were...

【Ringo Sagara : LV 1】

What I saw completely betrayed my expectations.

“This is strange, isn't it!”

It was like we had suddenly entered a setting where we were siblings or something, as this name that Ringo no doubt picked arbitrarily had become something that seemed official.

“R-Right? Are you okay with this?”

I showed her the sticker, and she nodded again with a motion so small that I would have missed it if I weren't focusing.

However, I couldn't understand it.

“You know, you have a real name: Shelmia. Why do you want to keep using...”

But, even at those words, she just ever so slowly shook her head.

“...This name is, special.”

“Special?”

Was that because it was the first name she heard after losing her memories?

Before I had time to think, she continued.

“And...”

With firm determination filling the depth of those blue eyes...

She looked up straight at me, and, unlike her, said in a clear voice.

“...Compared to Shelmia, Ringo sounds more delicious.”

“Eh?”

Sometimes, a person’s name can be decided based on deliciousness.

Having learned something new about life, the day came to a close.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki »» Nekomimineko Glossary

Princess Shelmia (Character)

The renowned princess of Licht, and an extremely popular Nekomimineko character.

Only three events involve her, and she had very few appearances because of the difficult conditions required to initiate those events, but, for better or for worse, her popularity was overwhelming, giving birth to many legends.

However, in a later patch, it was discovered that she could not be married, and with the advent of Mitsuki Hisame in an event added in the same patch she lost her spot as the most popular character.

Relevant Videos

All Scenes Involving Princess Shelmia <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

The Princess's Holiday 1 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

The Princess's Holiday 2 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

The Princess's Holiday 3 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

The Princess's Holiday Extra <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Famous Words By Princess Shemia <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Famous Words By Princess Shemia 2 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Famous Words By Princess Shemia 3 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Famous Words By Princess Shemia 4 <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Lightning Princess→Instadeath <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Buggy Castle Exploration 2 (aka. The Masked Royal Family of Licht)

<http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

10 Hours of Saying I Love You to Princess Shelmia <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

From the Upskirt Squad

Princess, Watch Your Feet! The Princess's Holiday Ep <http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Princess, Watch Your Feet! The Dark Sniper Vs The Terrace Ep

<http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Princess, Watch Your Feet! The Mischievous Breeze in the Audience Chamber Ep

<http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Princess, Watch Your Feet! The Desperate Royal Capital Invasion Ep

<http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

※Clicking on a link will bring you to a video-sharing site.

Chapter 3

The Lightning Princess

— 1 —

“Ringo, you know what we need to do, right?”

I asked in a tense voice, and she nodded silently.

Her nod seemed to be slightly more substantial than usual, perhaps because she also clearly understood the situation we were currently in.

In the end, her name was left as Ringo.

In the first place, including herself, nobody knew the name Shelmia anyways, so there was no real meaning in using that name. Since she seemed to have taken a liking to the name Ringo, it was probably better to just go with that.

And, more importantly.

We no longer had the leisure to worry about trivial things like that.

“It might be time for us to say goodbye...”

Before stepping out, I looked over the room I had lived in with Ringo one last time.

The simple bed, Ringo’s favorite chair that she always sat in, and the ample space that didn’t feel restricting even with two people.

Even though we hadn’t even spent a day together, to think that this was it made me feel a bit lonely.

“Even though I should’ve totally seen this coming, how could I...”

I sighed to myself, but it wasn’t like doing so would help with the situation.

That's right, everything was turned upside down just a few minutes ago.

After having found out Ringo's true identity by chance, we talked at length in the inn. With this new piece of information, we needed to sit down and properly discuss our next steps.

But, due to the words of an impolite intruder in the middle of our discussion, I received a shock as if a knife had been stabbed into my heart.

Even though I had been diving headfirst into shocking situations the past two days, these words had been on a different level.

That is...

"Ah, right. Well, I'll give you last night on the house. But if you're going to stay in this room then it'll be 1500E per night for two."

The inn owner's announcement of a price increase!

Even if I were a hopeless impulse buyer, I stuck to my limits.

Since I wanted to save enough for tonight's inn fare, I made sure that I had a full 1360E left even after I finished buying from the Lucky Jackpot at the weapon shop.

...That's right, 1360E.

After buying an apple from the produce stand, I currently possessed 1310E.

-In other words, right now, I couldn't afford the night's lodging.

Of course, if I ditched Ringo I would have enough, but that would weigh on my conscience.

Even though I was, in a sense, the victim of this whole thing, it was caused by the carelessness of one of my relatives, and, unlike Train Girl or Hisame, she probably couldn't survive by herself.

In which case...

"In the worst case, whoever loses in rock-paper-scissors will have to... sleep in the stable."

Reaffirming the situation, I felt myself starting to become somewhat depressed.

I never thought there would ever be a possibility I would have to experience something like that.

In a game world, smell and sense of touch generally did not exist, but in this world that was half real, sleeping in a space that was cramped and smelly and with zero security would be a bit too much for a city boy.

Even though I had generally slept in stables in the capital when I was still travelling with party members, especially during my first playthrough, we had properly stayed in inns. While I didn't remember what the prices were like anymore, I fully understood how the system for inn pricing worked. I just hadn't thought that far.

Actually, since I had already fallen below 1500E when leaving the weapon store, it probably wouldn't have mattered anyways.

(Damn it! If I had just endured instead of buying the Fingerless Glove...)

The scene of me in the weapon store, overjoyed at finding it and celebrating after putting it on, replayed itself in my mind, making me want to just slug my past self.

“But, this is not the time for regrets. I should do whatever I can right now!”

Composing my thoughts, I grasped my fist tightly in front of my chest.

As I did so...

“Ringo?”

People are said to grow the most when forced into extraordinary situations.

Perhaps she had been inspired by something I said, as, in an unusual turn of events, she slowly approached me and, holding out her hand, brought her palm towards my closed fist.

As if trying to show me her open palm, she flashed me a pure smile, like the smile of a princess...

“...You’re in the stable?”

That's just foul, Ringo!

In such a short time, she grew a ton in the negative direction!

Not to mention, for someone who didn't even know how to put clothes on, I'm impressed she knew what rock-paper-scissors was!

"A-Anyways! We desperately need money right now! No matter what, we need to make sure to earn at least 200E by the end of today!"

I shouted, trying to divert her attention away from rock-paper-scissors as I once again hardened my determination to avoid the stables, leaving the inn to make my last stand.

"...What, do we do?"

...Now then, what should we do?

While I had made it outside the inn, I hadn't even taken a few steps before stopping dead in my tracks. Ringo called out to me, but I couldn't find the words to respond to her with.

After staring at me like that for a bit, Ringo suddenly moved her hands to her clothes.

"...Take off."

"Like I said, eros is prohibited!"

Just how long was she going to be influenced by the ero-raincoat?

I hastily tried to stop her, but she was the one who halted me instead.

"...That's not it."

Using a minimal number of words, she denied it, and after squirming for a bit, she clumsily, but with her own abilities, took off the raincoat.

And then...

“Eh?”

She held it out towards me.

“...Sell, make money.”

Together with those touching words. But, of course, I couldn’t accept that.

“It’s okay. That’s your gift, Ringo. So, you should use it as you wish.”

“...Then, I’ll give it to you.”

It seemed like she was someone who didn’t like backing down. This unexpected stubbornness from Ringo was quite troublesome.

From my standpoint, I didn’t want to do something as uneconomic as selling something I bought from the store right back, and as a gamer my pride wouldn’t let me give up on a rare item that I had somehow managed to get my hands on.

But, if I said it like that, Ringo probably wouldn’t understand. While trying to come up with something on the spot, I tried to convince her.

“If you’re trying to be considerate to me, then I’d like you to wear that raincoat.”

“But...”

“It makes me happier when I see you wearing it. Or, maybe, do you not like it?”

I asked, slightly nervously, but Ringo shook her head again and again.

Her expressions were unchanged. But, even without reading into her expressions, the fact that she had taken a liking to that raincoat was more than conveyed just by looking at her behavior.

“...This, is.”

Looking at me with firm eyes, Ringo affectionately embraced the raincoat, and said.

“The first... ero-raincoat, you gave me.”

...Mm. I wonder why. It seemed like a really nice line, but I kinda felt like the proper noun in there had spoiled it. Well, if she was happy then I was happy.

“I have to apologize too. Giving you something like that as your first present.”

I had started to feel bad and apologized instead, but Ringo shook her head.

“...I, like it.”

“O-Oh.”

Hearing her saying it clearly like that and tightly clutch the ero-raincoat, there was nothing more I could say.

For some reason, I was assaulted with even more guilt.

“...And, I already received something even better.”

“Something even better?”

In the moment after I had asked back, I thought I had seen, for just an instant, some kind of emotion appear on Ringo’s face.

“...Name.”

But, the moment I heard her reply, those thoughts were blown completely out of my mind.

It was because what she had said was so far outside my expectations.

But, after thinking about it slightly, I realized she was talking about my last name, Sagara. Maybe Ringo had been, in her own way, worried about her lack of a concrete identity.

“Don’t worry too much about anything. C’mon, let’s go make some money.”

Starting to feel slightly embarrassed, I cut off the conversation and started walking forward.

But I immediately felt worried and looked back to see the blue haired girl toddling towards me, sometimes bumping into people in the process.

“Jeez, I guess there’s no choice.”

I was supposed to have gotten back my marvelous life as a loner, so how did it come to this.

While mulling over that in a corner of my heart, I grabbed Ringo’s hand as if it were only natural, and, leading her along, stepped off into the distance.

It was great that we were all fired up now, but Nekomimineko wasn't so kind that things could be accomplished just by being enthusiastic. In keeping with safety first, it'd be great if there were a well-paying quest inside the city, but such convenient quests were nowhere to be found.

“There's no other choice. We'll have to go out and hunt some monsters.”

Nekomimineko was an RPG, so of course, defeating monsters rewarded you with Elements.

Fighting while only level 13 was quite risky, but I couldn't think of any other way to earn money while broke.

The map that had the weakest monsters around the capital was the Deus Plains, where the monsters averaged around level 50.

It would be quite a tough fight, but with Shiranui's attack values winning was a possibility as long as I could land the hits. If I picked the right targets and bombarded them with skill cancelling, it should work out for me.

It did feel strange to be risking my life just for lodging charges, but you gotta do what you gotta do.

Steeling my resolve, I started walking towards the south gate, which connected to the Deus Plains.

“Listen up, Ringo. No matter what, don't move from this spot, and if monsters start approaching you, immediately run to the other side of the gate, got it?”

I briefed Ringo when we made it to the south gate.

While my level 13 was already not great, Ringo was only level 1. Even with the raincoat increasing her defense, it was highly likely that a single hit from a level 50 monster would kill her. Just in case, I gave her the Wakizashi for self-defence, but if she ever had to use it, she'd probably be dead.

“...Okay.”

As if having sensed something from my behavior, Ringo wore an unusually serious look as she nodded her head.

...With this, I can put all of my focus on fighting.

“First up is... them.”

I looked around the plains for suitable prey. What I set my sights on was a pair of Wild Zlimes.

Unfortunately, with the exception of rare monsters, none of the monsters in this field would be found alone. With that in mind, a pair of Wild Zlimes would probably be the easiest to defeat.

What I was worried about was the possibility that other monsters could wander over while I was fighting them, but that was a risk that I couldn’t avoid.

(Focus, focus! Even though my level is low, I can do this! Don’t forget, I’m a Nekomimineko player!)

I tried encouraging myself to try to suppress my fears. But, our level gap was clear. The thought that failing meant death kept gripping at my heart.

This extreme nervousness dripped down my forehead as cold sweat. That unpleasant sensation further ate away at my concentration, and my disarrayed thoughts led to further anxiety. This was a bad omen.

-Suddenly.

“...Souma.”

As I was frozen stiff, I felt a slight tug on my clothes from the side. It was Ringo.

I turned towards her, surprised at her taking the initiative to talk to me, and Ringo opened her small mouth.

“...Defeat, those?”

“Yeah. I’m going to jump on them now, so, Ringo, if you could stay—”

“...Nn. I’ll try.”

“Huh?”

I didn’t understand what Ringo had said at all.

But, what happened next, I understood even less.

There were still dozens of meters between us and the Wild Zlimes that I had set as my targets. As if ignoring that distance completely, Ringo pointed the Wakizashi in her hand towards the Wild Zlimes...

“...Eh?”

In an instant, a dazzling bolt of lightning surged from the tip of the blade.

“Ehh? What? Ehhhh!?”

In front of my startled eyes, the light that rushed out of the Wakizashi slammed straight into one of the Wild Zlimes.

There was a flash, followed by a loud rumble. Having received such an obviously powerful attack, the Wild Zlime toppled over without any resistance.

“...There.”

Aiming for that, more bolts of lightning surged from the tip of Ringo’s Wakizashi.

The second and third strikes hit before it had a chance to recover, even engulfing the Wild Zlime beside it. After being pelted continuously with lightning strikes...

“No way, you’re kidding!?”

The Wild Zlimes, while still convulsing, disappeared.

Was I dreaming? Thinking that, I turned to look at Ringo, and she, emotionless like always, pointed towards her feet.

“...Don’t worry. I didn’t move a step.”

“Ha,ahaha...”

Hearing those airheaded words from the girl who had just demolished those enemies that were around 50 levels higher, I could only give a dry laugh.

“Ringo, you can use magic!”

A while after the Wild Zlimes had disappeared, after I had finally recovered from the shock, I called out to Ringo, but...

“...Magic?”

Ringo tilted her head slightly.

“Then, was it a skill?”

I tried asking that as well, but it seemed like those words didn’t mean anything to her, as she just continued tilting her head.

“Could it be, you’ve never heard of skills or magic?”

Conceiving that possibility, I asked, and Ringo nodded without hesitation.

“Th-Then, how did you do that?”

“How...?”

Once again, she tilted her head.

Then, as if feeling some kind of duty...

“Like... this.”

This time, as she spoke, lightning flew out of her empty left hand, but of course that explained nothing.

Except, I somehow understood that what Ringo was using wasn't any kind of regular magic.

(Wait a second. I feel like I've seen this lightning magic some... Ah!)

"So that's it! Princess Shelmia's lightning magic!!"

During the event 'Royal Capital Invasion', Princess Shelmia also joined the battle, and she struck down monster after monster with fierce lightning strikes from her staff.

I had thought it was unfairly overpowered, but to think that Ringo could use it...

Well, they were originally the same character so it might not be strange that she could use it, but even with the Wakizashi equipped, that lightning strike was amazingly powerful to defeat level 50 enemies while at level 1.

As I shuddered inside, Ringo asked in a flat tone.

"...What's next?"

“This is... something.”

The power of Ringo’s lightning magic was so amazing that I found myself muttering out loud.

Its power was likely increasing as Ringo levelled up after defeating the monsters. She was now able to consistently defeat everything in two hits, and Wild Zlimes in just one hit, all from long-range. With that rule-breaking strength, she swept through the monsters on the plains one after another.

I had thought that continuously using such powerful magic would immediately exhaust all of her MP, but as of now there wasn’t even a sign of exhaustion on Ringo’s face.

I don’t think there’s any chance that she had infinite MP, so it was possible that lightning magic had no MP cost. It was getting more and more outrageous.

And, the result of having such a ridiculous partner...

“...Souma.”

“Roger ma’am! Wild Zlime Jelly, get!”

My current role was to retrieve the drops from the monsters Ringo defeated.

If you want to laugh at my pitifulness then go ahead. But I’ll tell it to you straight: if I can earn money without exposing my life to danger, then I’ll willingly hide behind anything, even a girl!

“...Next?”

Fortunately, Ringo didn’t criticize me for that. Rather, she seemed to be quite enthusiastically defeating monsters. Due to her expressionlessness it was impossible to tell from looking at her, but her eagerness showed through from how she was urging us forwards.

But well, regrettably for her, the amount of monsters available for us to defeat was

slowly diminishing...

“...Wait, there’s way too few monsters. Could it be that the monsters aren’t respawning?”

Normally, field monsters respawned after some amount of time. But right now it felt to me like their numbers were decreasing monotonically.

It would be huge if that were the case. The problem wouldn’t just be that we wouldn’t be able to farm in this field. If Nekomimineko becoming real has affected the behavior of monster spawns, then there was no telling what kind of miscalculations that could lead to in the future.

I was worried for a moment, but I immediately shook my head.

That would indeed be hard to believe. Through all the fighting in Ramlich, the behavior of monster spawns were frighteningly faithful to the game.

“In that case, this is all expected behavior, something that could happen even in the game?”

Pondering for a bit with that postulation, I hit upon one possibility.

How could this have slipped my mind. As long as this was Nekomimineko, there was only one possibility for monsters to stop spawning.

Beside me, perhaps due to having nothing to do, Ringo was staring at the sky. I hastily yelled out to her.

“This is bad! We need to return to the town right away!”

“...Souma?”

Not even waiting for her confused reply, I grabbed Ringo’s hand and started to run.

“We have to hurry! If I’m correct, very soon there’s going to be a mass spawning event on these plains!”

Thus, we dashed to the bounty hunters' guild.

Of the three main guilds, this was the only one that we hadn't visited yet.

To put it simply, the bounty hunters' guild was something like an adventurer's guild that you often see in games, where one could fulfil various requests for money.

Because of how it worked, for a reason completely different from Hisame's, it was also called the saving grace of Nekomimineko.

-After all, the requests in the bounty hunters' guild were all generated completely randomly.

Randomly, "destroy" and "collect" requests came in to the bounty hunters' guild.

There were no restrictions on guild rank, nor even the need to join the guild, and one could freely decide what requests they would like to accept after reading descriptions such as "destroy three Zlimes by July 9th" or "collect two Zlime Drops by July 10th".

Destroy requests were cleared by defeating the given number of monsters and reporting that by the deadline, and collect requests were cleared by giving the specified amount of monster drops to the guild by the deadline. It was a simple system, and since the requests were randomly generated, it didn't contain any of the bad characteristics of Nekomimineko.

It was a system so well-loved by Nekomimineko players that it gave birth to a saying, "getting grilled? Hunter's guild". Well, you could also say that the normal quests were just way too abominable.

That was not the only way in which the bounty hunters' guild was kind to players. In addition to normal requests, there was also a special event called an extermination fest that occurred during mass spawnings, which was very juicy. My aim right now was exactly that.

Whether normal requests or extermination fests, neither meant anything unless I stepped into the building. While I was worried that there might be someone strange waiting to ambush me inside like at the other guilds, this was a situation in which there was not a moment to lose. I promptly pushed open the doors and peeked inside.

(...Alright!)

I didn't spot anyone that I needed to be wary of.

Slightly relieved, I entered the guild. From the looks of it, the extermination fest hadn't yet started.

"I guess I'll go take a look at the normal requests until the mass spawning starts. If there's anything simple then I might as well accept it later."

For destroy requests, it was required to rent a special crystal from the counter. To do so, half of the reward must be placed as deposit.

The deposit was returned at the end of the request, but with my current finances it was hard to say if I even had enough for the deposit.

(Mm. I guess I should just sit and wait, huh...)

Taking into account my current strength, I didn't really want to fight anywhere with strong enemies.

The place we were farming at, the Deus Plains, was the weakest area, so obviously requests in other areas would be more dangerous. They weren't worth it knowing that the mass spawning and extermination fest were happening soon.

Just then, the clock struck noon.

And, at the same time...

"The mass spawning prediction, is here!"

Out of breath, a man that seemed like someone from the guild rushed out and stuck a new piece of paper right in the middle of all the requests.

Seeing that, everyone in the guild burst into surprise, filling the room with commotion.

"No way. Are you serious..."

I was no exception.

"Could this mean that luck's actually on our side?"

I involuntarily asked myself.

Even having predicted that a mass spawning, and thus an extermination fest, was going to happen, the notice still surprised me.

The paper that was put up.

It's contents were...

“A mass spawning of Golden Wild Zlimes in the Deus Plains is predicted.”

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki >>> Nekomimineko Glossary

Zlime (Monster)

Known by everyone, Nekomimineko's mascot monster.

With a pure attack pattern consisting only of tackles and the two bulges on its head that somewhat resemble cat ears, it is a very calming monster.

There are many subspecies such as the Ugly Zlime, Wild Zlime, Golden Wild Zlime, and Ulime.

Rainbow Rain (Magic)

With an astonishing seven elemental types, it is one of the ultimate offensive magic spells.

With so many elemental types, it is sure to hit any monster's weaknesses... but due to Nekomimineko's system, if the monster is immune to any of the elemental types the final damage becomes zero, so it was rare to do any damage with it past mid game. Has a very flashy effect. One of the four kings of lag.

Earth Grave (Magic)

Summons stone spears from the ground. Intermediate earth element spell.

Or it was supposed to be, but due to a mistake in the configuration it was treated as a physical attack. Extremely useful in the end game when enemies have many resistances. Magicians' last hope. (Fixed in version 1.10)

All hope is dead.

Flower on the Crag (Quest)

A simple quest to retrieve a flower from the rocky mountains south of the capital... except, to many players, it was a difficult and tormenting quest. The mountain is dotted with many obvious caves, each of which is a mini dungeon, but even after searching each of them thoroughly the flower is nowhere to be found.

The punch line is that the flower isn't actually in any of the caves, it's actually on the top of the mountain.

Chapter 4

Golden Wild Zlime Extermination Fest

— 1 —

Zlimes once lived alongside humans

They were extremely gentle creatures that lived in herds

They were said to be as calm as the Buddha

But, for whatever reason, there were some that separated from their herds

Leading to a completely different story

Those Zlimes, ending up all alone

Lacked the stability of a herd, and lost the support for their hearts

Resulting in an increase in ferocity

These Zlimes would even attack humans

Causing them to be treated as monsters

There were some that were ejected from the herd due to their looks

They slanted towards being quite aggressive

These were called Ugly Zlimes

However, even being more aggressive, they were still Zlimes

So they were quickly dispatched by adventurers

But there were some Zlimes that patiently bided their time

Turning a blind eye to the deaths of their fellow brethren and continued living on

These became known by a different name

The wildest of the wild

The loneliest of the loners

They were the Wild Zlimes

It wasn't just that they were living in the wild, they strayed from even that

As natural loners, the Wild Zlimes were strong

Having survived by stepping over the carcasses of their brethren

They possess a vast amount of magic energy, and their potential has far surpassed that of Zlimes

And with their hearts forged from long years of loneliness

They were even able to use magic, something that was impossible for Zlimes

For adventurers, they were not simple opponents to deal with

Then, when those Wild Zlimes continued living

The prolonged lives as loners slowly petrified their hearts

Resulting in the metallic body of the Silver Wild Zlime

Silver Wild Zlimes trust in nobody and have no desires

Their closed-off hearts harden even their bodies into a cold silver color

Having survived without caring about anything else, they are very fast at escaping

Even experienced adventurers would have problems catching up

Unlike Wild Zlimes, they immediately run away when they see an adventurer

Since they run away, have high defense and high agility, it is difficult to defeat them

In that case, defeating them should yield a lot of experience

You might anticipate that, but in the end it's just a secluded loner

So there's no way it has a lot of life experience

Perhaps that is part of their self-preservation tactics

From the difficulty of defeating them to the small amount of experience and Elements

They stopped being the target of adventurers

The Silvers have become true solitary loners

On the other hand, there are some Wild Zlimes that proactively fight with adventurers

Constantly improving themselves until they start giving off a golden glow

These are the Golden Wild Zlimes

Their tough bodies and speed at escaping are the same as the Silvers

But their reasons for escaping and the amount of experience and magic energy they hold are completely different

While they are very powerful, they do not desire to fight

However, the experience that they had continued to accumulate until their bodies turned golden

As well as their large amount of Elements were especially alluring for adventurers

And since they don't want to fight, they will not attack

Thus, all the adventurers yearn for them

They are completely different from the unpopular and lonely Silvers.

So that's why I'm a Golden Wild Zlime

And you're a Silver Wild Zlime!

QED!

Above was a lengthy post that had appeared in Nekomimineko's forums.

It was basically just a lengthy attack at the end of a flame war, but in the end, the poster was chased out of the thread by a full-combo of "tl;dr", "disgusting", and "you're still a loner in the end, though". But, since the contents were quite interesting, the post made its way into a corner of the Nekomimineko wiki. Of course, everything about the Zlimes was completely made up, but at the same time it made one feel like it might not be complete gibberish.

Silver Wild Zlimes were completely worthless monsters since they hardly gave any experience or money, probably due to a mistake from the staff when setting the values, but Golden Wild Zlimes had a vast amount of experience and money, and they didn't even attack at all. They could theoretically be defeated as a level 1; they were literally the perfect example of being sitting ducks.

If there was going to be a mass spawning of Golden Wild Zlimes, that was something that couldn't be passed up.

To put it simply, a mass spawning involved a single type of monster taking over a specific field or dungeon. There was a distinctive sign for this: a few hours before the mass spawning occurred, monsters in that location would stop respawning.

The monster chosen for mass spawnings was randomly selected out of all of the monsters that could spawn in that location, but this was the first time that I'd ever seen it be the Golden Wild Zlime.

The time of the mass spawning was predicted to be around two hours later, from 2pm to 4pm this afternoon.

If we did this right, we could easily make up enough for tonight's inn. Not only that, it might even be possible to make enough that we wouldn't need to worry about money for a while.

I moved my gaze to the commotion around, and saw that the adventurers who had seen the sheet of paper were all rushing towards the counter, shouting out their intent on joining the Extermination Fest. We couldn't afford to miss this chance.

“Ringo, we’re joining too.”

From what I could see, there were less than 20 people in the guild right now. With just this number, securing a spot should be possible, but if we waited too long that might not be the case.

Pulling Ringo by her hand, we moved towards the counter.

I applied at the counter, entering Ringo and myself as a team for the Golden Wild Zlime Extermination Fest.

We received the special crystal that kept track of the number of monsters destroyed from the seedy old man at the counter.

Normally, the magic energy from defeated monsters was automatically absorbed by the crystal one carried as a wallet, becoming Elements (money), but the Bounty Hunters' Guild used that principle to create a special crystal for destroy requests.

This special crystal only absorbed the magic energy of the specified monster, and filled up completely after the specified number of monsters had been defeated, notifying that the request had been completed. Bringing this back to the counter acted as proof that the request was fulfilled, but, in order to borrow this, half of the reward in Elements had to be put down as security.

But during Extermination Fests, in order to prevent the mass spawned monsters from attacking the towns, or at least with that pretext, the first 50 registrants could rent the special crystal for free.

Obtaining one of those special crystals was the first requirement for participating in an Extermination Fest.

Extermination Fests were a mix of both destroy and collect requests for the mass spawned monster (in this case, the Golden Wild Zlime).

During Extermination Fests, participants were treated like they constantly had a destroy and collect request active. What this meant was that if you defeated 10 of the target monsters during an Extermination Fest, then you would receive a reward equivalent to if you had accepted a destroy request for 10 of those monsters, and if you collected 5 of the monster's drop items, then you would receive a reward equivalent to if you had accepted a collect request for 5 of those drop items, paid out at the end of the Fest.

This was already extremely enticing. Just that was already extremely enticing, but in addition, for the participant that received the highest reward during the Extermination Fest, their reward jumped to 10x as a bonus! Second place would get 3x, and third place would get 2x. Due to the incomparable increase in reward, it was extremely important to aim for the top 3.

Especially important were teams. During registration, up to three players could form a team, and the total reward would be summed up among those players.

Like I mentioned, I had registered with Ringo as a team. While it would be advantageous to have a third person, I didn't want to deal with fighting over the reward at the end. We'd do our best to aim for first place with just the two of us.

Mass spawning and the associated Extermination Fest were rare events that one would be lucky to run into even two or three times before clearing the game. But it was one of the biggest bonus events in Nekomimineko, and yet another reason why the Bounty Hunters' Guild was called the saving grace of Nekomimineko.

That said, if the target monster was too strong then it would be impossible to participate, and if the target location was too far away then, in the worst case, it might even be impossible to reach the location before the end of the mass spawning.

Also, since monsters spawned in large numbers, it frequently led to much tougher combat situations than normal.

While mass spawnings and Extermination Fests were definitely big chances, they were certainly not freebie events.

Except this time.

Occurring in the nearby Deus Plains, with the target monster being the high reward, low risk Golden Wild Zlime, this was something that I had never seen even in the game, and something that I couldn't ask for more of.

Against Goldens, there was no risk of death, and becoming a millionaire might not be a dream if first place were secured. Even without that, just killing a few of them would ensure that we wouldn't have to worry about lodging costs anymore.

Goodbye, stables! We're heading to better places!

I'd had quite the time since coming to this world, but it seemed that somewhere some god had been looking over me.

Finally, it was my lucky day.

"Alright, let's go practice our strategy right away!"

For now, there were still two hours until the mass spawning. During that time, we needed to come up with a plan for defeating the Golden Wild Zlimes.

-Just then.

As I was about to waltz out of the guild, I heard a voice that, while just as agitated as the adventurers squealing about their sudden stroke of luck, was of a slightly different tone.

“Why, why Goldens of all things! Ah, ahhhh, the guild reserves we built up bit by bit over 300 years...! It’s the end of the guild!!”

...Ah, yeah. Sorry, my sincerest condolences.

After departing the Bounty Hunters' Guild, we first went to the Item Shop.

Thinking about it, I had completely forgotten to buy a crystal to use as Ringo's wallet. Fortunately, the Elements from the monsters she killed in the Deus Plains had found their way into my wallet for some reason, but if I didn't get her a crystal of her own soon it'd start to feel unfair.

“...This brings back memories...”

Here, in the capital's Item Shop, was the last place I had entered in the game, and the last place at which I had been killed. Just seeing it broke my good mood, but there was nothing I could do about the past.

Bringing along the ever-stuporous Ringo, we went inside.

“Ah, welcome!”

An employee pushing a large cart, possibly in the middle of restocking, called out to us in a cheerful voice. What's more, they actually came towards us, pushing the cart along, wearing a friendly smile on their face.

“Are you looking for something? Everything is at a discount!”

The employee boasted, but as far as I could see, everything in the store was at regular price.

I started to make a bitter smile, when...

“How about it? I can give you a huge discount!”

The employee came on forcefully, pushing both their words and the cart towards me.

“Uwah.”

Seeing the item that filled the cart in large quantities, I was slightly taken aback.

In the cart was a countless number of human skull... shaped ornaments.

“Kuul Skulls...”

I accidentally muttered out loud, and the employee gleefully persisted.

“As I had expected! You must be quite the person to know about these Kuul Skulls!”

“Y-Yeah. I, gue...ss.”

On the other hand, I couldn’t help but give an unenthusiastic response.

Of course, the reason I knew about these [Kuul Skulls] was because of my experience in the game. These pure-black ornamental skulls were necessary items for the quest “Beacon for the Lost Child”.

Beacon for the Lost Child was a simple errand-type quest where your goal is to “place guiding beacons at the target locations to help my little sister, who has no sense of direction”... but for a while, it was believed that this event was impossible to clear.

The requester handed you 30 [Bread Crumbs] to use as the beacon, but just like in that famous fairy tale, birds would eat these and cause you to fail the quest. Then, when given [White Pebbles] to use, they would all be picked up by neighborhood kids and in the end you’d fail the quest. Even when you tried using your own items, they still ended up being picked up by kids, and you failed the quest. So just how could you set up these beacons?

Most players had given up there, but a certain player had published the correct answer online. It was these ornaments, so unpopular that stores had over a hundred in stock: [Kuul Skulls].

These skulls apparently had the system setting that “when placed, nobody will want to pick them up”, and truly enough, they were ignored by even the neighborhood kids that would pick up pebbles without fail. While it made one worry for and wonder why the item shop had stocked so much of such an unpopular item, as a result, this quest could finally be cleared.

It was true that these skulls were bigger than [Bread Crumbs] or [White Pebbles], and the ominous aura that they project far into the distance definitely made them stand out, but normally nobody would consider using something like this as a guiding item. It was really a very Nekomimineko-esque choice.

By the way, probably since they were quest items, these skulls would remain on the ground without disappearing even after the quest finished, waiting for the player to retrieve them. Since they considerably tarnished the look of the city, players basically retrieved them as soon as they cleared the quest, but no matter where they went all they would get was “we definitely won’t buy that”. The unpopularity of this item could make one cry.

However, even with its lack of popularity, it was priced at a ridiculous 100E each. To clear the quest, a minimum of 25 were needed, which meant a minimum of 2500E. It was an amount that was a bit out of my reach right now.

Yet, it seemed like this employee was extremely eager to sell these fashionable skulls.

“They’re this month’s specials! Our store highly recommends these fashionable ornaments. You can use them as interior decoration, or wear them as stylish accessories, or use them to establish the feel of a cursed ceremony, or secretly slip them into the house of someone you hate, or place them around your house to guard against burglars; they’re wonderful, perfect items!”

Um, the last three were clearly the complete opposite of fashionable.

“Uhh, that’s...”

Seeing my hesitation, the employee drew even closer to me. Too close.

“Th-They’re really amazing! I tried putting them around my own house, and wow! Not only have I never gotten robbed, my neighbors won’t even come close, stray cats won’t even wander near my place, and I’m even too scared to enter my house anymore!”

“Uhhhhhh.”

“B-By living in the store I’ve gotten more shifts, so it’s actually a lucky item! It’s a cursed skull that brings good fortune! A-And, what’s more, if you buy one of these wonderful cursed skulls today, you’ll get ten more for free!”

“Uh, you called it ‘cursed’ just now.”

Just how much do they want to get rid of these skulls.

Finally, unable to put on airs any longer, the employee clinged onto me.

“Please, I’m begging you, just take it off my hands! If I can’t get rid of these, I might end up going out of business!”

“Suddenly you show your true character!”

Putting aside this employee’s lack of respect for their customers, what they were saying might not have been a lie. In the game, wherever these skulls were placed, the NPCs, animals, and even monsters all avoided it. If you put it by the entrance, then of course people wouldn’t come in.

“Ah, this young lady over here, would you like one? Actually, don’t stop at just one, would you like a few?”

Perhaps my silence had caused them to give up on me, as the employee changed their target to Ringo. Rolling the cart along, the skulls were pushed towards Ringo.

“.....”

While maintaining silence and emotionlessness, Ringo very clearly shook her head. For that Ringo to express her opinion so clearly, she must really detest it.

“If you don’t want to buy them, at least have a look! Just have a look, then pick it up, then bring it to the checkout!”

“...N-No need.”

As the employee approached her with the cart, Ringo quickly slid behind my back. Hugging her body to my back, only her head peeked out slightly, wary of the employee.

“Now now, don’t say that! If you just try touching it, I’m sure you’ll understand the charm of these skulls.”

As if the employee had set their mark on Ringo, they continued to move towards her. Ringo hastily made a half loop around my body, escaping away from the employee. The employee continued to chase with the cart.

Somehow, we ended up in a situation where the two of them were running circles around me, playing tag.

“What are you two doing...”

After the two continued circling around me at high speed for a while, I started to feel like I should probably try to stop them.

“Fufufu. Dear customer, it’s about time you resigned yourse-eh?”

The cart the employee was pushing caught onto something, destroying its balance. However, the momentum of the cart could not be stopped, and the cart, along with the employee, flipped over.

“Hya, Hyaaaaaaaaaa!!”

The skulls scattered all around, and together with a loud scream, the employee fell onto the skulls.

Ringo had shrewdly hidden behind me, and after checking that no harm had come to her, I approached the employee in the middle of the skulls.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“...Y-Yeah.”

I called out, and the employee slowly opened their eyes.

“Ah, wh-wh-wh...”

But, realizing that they were surrounded by skulls, their face slowly turned pale.

“-N-Noooooo! Skulls are scaryyyyyyyy!!”

No longer caring about looks, they broke down crying.

“Weren’t you supposed to understand the charm of these skulls if you try touching it...?”

This was a perfect example of a situation brought upon oneself. As I merely looked on in amazement, I heard Ringo’s appreciative murmuring from behind me.

“...This is fanservice.”

“Eh?”

After noticing the flash of a white paradise inside the employee's skirt, I hurriedly rushed to help her up.

“Thank you very much!”

Even though it was an item that NPCs wouldn’t touch, there were no problems for me, the player. After I picked up all of the skulls scattered on the ground and returned them to the cart, the employee bowed deeply towards me.

“Just 3 more seconds. If your help had come just 3 seconds later, I definitely would have peed my pants. Sir, you are my life’s... no, my panties’ savior!”

“...Mm, uh, good for you.”

That glimpse of the white paradise resurfaced in the back of my mind the moment she said that, but from the looks of it, she hadn’t noticed that I had caught a glance of it. I let out a breath.

Still, she was, after all, a female, and I kinda wished that she wouldn’t say such things out loud.

“If you need help with anything, please let me know! I’ll help with anything!”

“Anything?”

“Yes! For the proper price!”

“...Ah, is that so.”

It seemed like she wasn’t about to offer any help for free. This employee had quite the salesman’s spirit.

“Okay, then. Do you have anything that works well against Golden Wild... Actually.”

I opened my mouth, hoping to get some items that would help with the Extermination Fest, but then changed my mind. Sneaking a look at Ringo behind me, still warily hiding from the employee, I adjusted my words.

“Do you have an item that can recall past memories?”

Throwing out a question that I didn't really have any expectations for...

"Yes, of course! Follow me!"

The employee enthusiastically answered.

The object she showed me was a transparent orb like the crystal balls that fortune tellers use.

I recall having seen this in the game before. This was...

"A Replaying Orb, huh."

"That's right! If you hold this and say the name of the person whose past you want to see, you can relive their past... probably."

-This smells fishy, I thought.

The reason I hadn't immediately thought of this Replaying Orb when I saw that Ringo had lost her memories was because, in the game, this orb was an unreleased feature.

It was supposed to be a specialized item for recording replay data from inside the game, which could then be viewed later.

It would have two unique traits. First, the replay data would be saved separately from the normal game save, so even if the game save was deleted in order to create a new character, it would be possible to view the replays from an old character. The other being that, by reenacting the recorded situation through the replay data, it would be possible to watch your own play from a 3rd person's perspective.

I had honestly believed that it would be released, so from the beginning of my first playthrough all the way until the later half of my second playthrough I had kept the recording functionality on, constantly creating replay data. However, even as it ate up a massive amount of storage space, there were no signs that the feature would be implemented any time soon. I had also started hearing bad reviews of Nekomimineko, so at that point I had completely given up on anticipating the replay functionality.

For what it's worth, replay data should still remain in my VR machine. If the functionality were to be implemented, it was supposed to be possible to view the replay by touching the orb and saying the filename, and by default the filename was

set to be the same as the player name.

While it wouldn't be unthinkable to be able to see the past of the person whose name you say, it was questionable whether the orb would actually work. The employee's suspicious attitude was the strongest proof that this item was definitely defective in some way.

It'd be different if I had money to spare, but for now let's just wait and see.

Just as I had decided that...

“Huh, Ringo?”

She was supposed to have been behind me, but Ringo had somehow moved herself in front and was looking intently at the orb.

Had she been drawn to its mysterious looks, or had she heard our conversation and wanted to recover her own memories? In either case, it was rare for Ringo to show interest in something other than food.

“Do you, want it?”

Ringo twitched when she heard that; she looked at me, then back at the orb, and then at my waist where I kept the crystal used as a wallet, and slowly shook her head.

“...N-No.”

Even as she replied, she was looking longingly at the orb. Surprisingly, it seemed like she was trying to restrain herself since we had no money.

Sure, we had no money. But, this was where I would get to show off my resourcefulness.

I turned to the employee.

“Um, this orb—”

“It'll be 5000E.”

“U-Um, I'm saying—”

“It’ll be 5000E!”

Faced with the employee’s steel skin and the cruel reality of being broke, my heart was about to break.

However, I didn’t give in. Even as unlikely as it was, we had finally come upon a possibility for Ringo to recover her memories. I persisted desperately.

“How about we, you know, do a bit of a give-and-take? I mean, I’m your pa..., your savior right? Couldn’t you give me some kind of deal...”

Hearing my proposal, the employee just smirked. She showed an arrogance not at all like someone who was about to wet herself surrounded by skulls a few moments ago.

“While give-and-take is how the world works, that’s only when exchanging things of equal value. A pair of new panties could be bought for just 300E. Even if you’re my panties’ savior, there’s no way you can get 5000E of merchandise just for a pair of panties.”

“B-But, being your p-panties’ savior can’t be measured so simply, right? It’s the kind of thing that money can’t...”

“Jeez! If you’re going to insist like that, I’ll give you these panties! Does that satisfy you!”

“I don’t get why you’re snapping at me, and that’s not the problem here!”

I reflexively shouted back, then a thought suddenly hit me.

“...Wait. We just need to provide something of equal value. So, how about something like this?”

Ten or so minutes later.

We successfully got our hands on the Replaying Orb, as well as a wallet crystal and an Adventurer’s Bag for Ringo, all free of charge.

I had proposed, as grounds for the exchange, to remove the skulls surrounding the

employee's home. Just by going to the employee's home nearby and quickly retrieving the skulls, the employee's attitude immediately did another 180, as she lauded me: "Dear customer, you're a god!"

...Truthfully, while NPCs couldn't approach or pick up those skulls, it was possible for them to be destroyed from a distance, but I kept that to myself.

She seemed to be quite grateful for being able to enter her own home again, as she not only presented the items I wanted essentially for free, she even gave me her own personal gift.

As Ringo was adjusting her Adventurer's Bag, she pulled me to a corner of the store out of Ringo's sight.

"U-Uhm! H-Here!"

With a slight blush on her face, she forced a small, folded, flower-patterned handkerchief into my hand.

"Are you giving this to me?"

I asked without thinking, and her entire face from her neck up turned bright red. After flapping her mouth like a fish a few times, she spoke as quickly as she could.

"I-I'm seriously thankful for your help, and I'm a woman who keeps her promises! That's actually my favorite, so please take care of... ah! J-Just to let you know, that's a clean one from the drawer!"

"Eh, ah, got it..."

Isn't it normal to give something that's new at times like these? I thought. But for being her favorite, it did fittingly have a nice design.

While it was very girlish and probably wouldn't suit me, it was a bright and cheerful handkerchief very much like this employee.

I seem to remember having seen something similar very recently. Maybe things like this were popular in this city.

"I think that, while it's a bit childish, it's very nice and cute."

“Eh? H-hy-au...”

“Thank you. I'll take good care of it.”

I thanked her with a smile, and her red face turned even redder as she ran away from me.

Seeing her strange reaction I half teasingly, half gratefully waved the handkerchief at the employee who was looking at me from afar.

“P-Put that away! Hurry up and put that awayy!”

She yelled with her face flushed, causing Ringo to look at her curiously.

Unexpectedly, it seemed that she had a cute side to her.

“Here you go, Ringo. It’s the orb you wanted.”

After putting away the handkerchief and leaving the store, I held the Replaying Orb out towards Ringo.

However, instead of reaching for it, Ringo just continued to stare at the orb. After how much she had wanted it, this behavior was worrying.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want it?”

I tried asking, and Ringo slowly shook her head.

“...I have nothing to give.”

“To give...? Ah, ahhh!”

Was Ringo concerned about all that give-and-take stuff the employee had been talking about?

“...Souma, do you want, anything?”

Ringo asked me back.

It would’ve been easy to just answer that I didn’t want anything, but asking for something small in exchange might be better for Ringo’s development.

Searching for something to ask for, I glanced over Ringo, and I found my eyes drawn towards her brilliant blue hair.

“It’s, not quite a thing that I want, but. Ringo, your hair is really pretty.”

So could I try touching it a bit, was what I wanted to say. But before I could, Ringo took action.

“...Mm. Wait.”

While I was still trying to figure out what her words meant, Ringo gathered her hair with one hand and quickly drew the Wakizashi with the other.

“Wha!?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, she swung it by her head, cleanly cutting off her beautiful blue hair.

“W, wha, what are you doing!”

I involuntarily howled at her.

But, could you blame me for that? Seeing that long and beautiful hair being cut off, anyone would want to shout out. Especially since the hairstyles of characters in the world of Nekomimineko didn’t change, so who knows if it would ever grow out again.

As I stood there, shocked speechless, Ringo held her hand out towards me without a shred of remorse, but rather with a look of satisfaction.

“...Here.”

In her hand was the blue hair she had just cut off.

Well, I did say that it was pretty, and after she asked me what I wanted. But this wasn’t what I meant.

While agonizing over my own carelessness, I once again came to realize that Ringo was definitely lacking in common sense.

“Thank you, Ringo. But please don’t do something like this ever again. Your hair is the prettiest when it’s on your head.”

As gently as I could, I explained to her.

“...This is, not good enough?”

I was trying to scold Ringo on her recklessness, but, seeing her ask nervously, it seemed that her interest was solely in finding something to exchange.

“...Nah. It’s a rare gift from you, so I’ll accept it. But it might make me even happier if you would work hard with me during this Extermination Fest.”

“...Mm. I’ll try, my best.”

Seeing Ringo tightly grasp her Wakizashi, I felt relieved. With this, everything should have been sorted out. It would've been nice to hype up the Extermination Fest a bit more, but...

“Well, before that, how about giving the orb a try? You wanted it, right?”

Ringo gave a sincere nod, putting away the Wakizashi and grabbing the orb.

She then immediately tried to open her mouth...

“Ah, wait! Ringo, do you still remember your old name?”

“...Shelmia?”

“Yeah. Shelmia El Licht. Don’t mess it up.”

I reminded her once again and, after looking at me curiously for a little while, Ringo gave a small nod.

I held my breath and watched over her. With this, Ringo might be able to regain her memories.

Carrying both of our hopes, Ringo, with what almost seemed like anticipation, hoisted the orb with both hands as she yelled out a name.

“–Souma Sagara!”

...Wait, what? That one?

In the end, the orb never activated.

Just in case, we also had her try saying “Shelmia El Licht,” but nothing happened.

I thought that there might’ve been a chance in this world, but as an item for a

unreleased feature, it was apparently just a piece of junk with no meaning whatsoever.

“Still, why did you say my name instead of your own?”

Hearing my question, Ringo tilted her head as if I were asking something completely outside of her expectations. It seemed that, for Ringo, there never was a choice besides saying my name to begin with.

“...I wanted to learn about you.”

“Mm, but still, aren’t you at all interested about your past?”

“...Not really.”

There was no doubt in her reply. She seriously didn’t seem to care much about it.

“But, it’s really too bad that it doesn’t do anything.”

I tried to say something to comfort her, but Ringo shook her head instead.

“...It’s okay. Present, remains.”

The Replaying Orb was a single-use item. If the replay were successful, then the orb would’ve shattered by now. As if happy that it was able to stay in a tangible form, Ringo rubbed the bag she had put the orb in with satisfaction. But, the next moment, her elated expression turned into a shudder.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

Her drastic change induced me to ask, and for someone who didn’t show any reaction when the orb failed to work, Ringo seemed like she was almost about to break out in tears as she answered.

“...I should’ve kept the apple core too.”

“That’s something you should throw away!”

Mhm. I really don’t understand the way Ringo thinks.

The Item Shop took up much more time than expected. I wanted to hurry and start practicing strategies for the Extermination Fest, and for that, I needed to first confirm Ringo's specs, during which a surprising truth was uncovered.

-Would you believe it? She can't use a single skill or magic!

Well, it would be slightly misleading to say that she can't use it. It was possible that she would be able to use it after practicing, but right now, she's only learned the most basic skills and magic and has no idea how to use them. Then, just what was the lightning magic that mowed down all those Wild Zlimes?

I'll start from the conclusion.

It surprised me, but that wasn't lightning magic. It was actually her *normal attack*.

To begin with, she didn't even know about the existence of skills and magic, and there was no way she would know how to cast something she didn't know existed. Then how was she able to fire off those lightning strikes? That was because, to her, it was an action that just came naturally.

I'm not very familiar with AI so this is just speculation, but just like how there might be actions such as "swing arm" or "raise leg", she might have had a special action, "fire lightning from hand", that was coded in.

Thinking back, I had thought during the Royal Capital Invasion event that Princess Shelmia was defeating monsters left and right with lightning magic as if she were just firing off normal attacks, but to think that they were really just normal attacks. To do that just because she couldn't join player parties seemed like cutting way too many corners. Of course, that was also why she didn't run out of MP.

After that, I investigated the specs of her "normal attack" by having her shoot at things in the area or Master Torch.

Firstly, the collision for each bolt of lightning is determined independently, so if multiple bolts hit then it was, of course, treated as a multi-hit. Its damage increased when wielding a weapon with physical power, and since its damage wasn't affected by wielding a weapon that increased magical power, it probably scales off the strength

stat. Just when I thought it might be the same as a regular normal attack, her damage didn't increase as much as expected when I had her try holding Shiranui. It seems like it might not be affected by the weapon type bonus. Furthermore, I had her attack an item with elemental resistances to check, but no matter what weapon she used it ended up being a non-elemental physical attack.

Everything about it was just a huge mess.

In the end, her attack was not magic at all. It didn't have a lightning element and was treated as a physical attack. She was wielding a staff during events, but if that staff were something that increases magical power then it might've been completely meaningless.

I could understand it based on the data, but I just couldn't wrap my head what the point of it all was.

For now, I decided to just accept it as quality Nekomimineko and to not think too hard about it. With this [lightning normal attack], defeating Golden Wild Zlimes should be relatively easier.

I ended up spending quite a bit of time on Ringo, but it wasn't like I was just playing around either. While Ringo was shooting off sparks of lightning here and there, I was steadily whacking Master Torch right beside her.

While it may have looked like I was just playing around, this high-level torch that I obtained from the hidden dungeon near Ramlich had an effect where just whacking it with a weapon would cause your weapon mastery to grow explosively.

And so, using that effect, I finally gained the ability to use fire magic!

...You might wonder how we reached the conclusion of being able to use magic from talking about weapon mastery. Actually, in Nekomimineko, there was a strange system where attacking with an elemental weapon raised the magic mastery of that element.

That's where the Heat Knife I bought today came in. By hitting Master Torch with this fire elemental weapon, I was able to successfully increase both my fire mastery and dagger mastery.

Magic was something that could be learned by reading magical tomes sold in places like magic shops, and could be used once the required elemental mastery for its

element was reached. The fire magic from the tomes I bought in Ramlich that I hadn't been able to use until now had finally been unlocked.

Unfortunately, our current targets, the Golden Wild Zlimes, were completely impervious to magic. There wouldn't be any meaning in attacking them with offensive spells, and offensive spells cast by me, someone not specializing in magic, would only have limited effectiveness anyways, but even so, there were many useful fire elemental spells.

The two spells that I unlocked were Powerup and Petiteplosion. These were trademark spells, and very useful ones that could even be used until the endgame after some customization.

Powerup was a spell that did not depend on your magic power, with the invaluable effect of increasing the user's strength by a percentage. It's said to be one of the core spells for fighter-types.

Petiteplosion was a lower ranked Explosion, but in many situations it could be a much more convenient spell. It didn't use much MP and the power of the explosion was not very great, but it creates a shockwave with a knockback effect that doesn't differentiate between enemies and allies, giving it many potential uses.

Since I had made sure to buy elemental attack boosting rings in the accessory shop, equipping those would surely transform this into an even more useful spell.

In addition to fire elemental magic, there was another skill that I gained using the Heat Knife, a dagger skill that should prove useful in the upcoming Extermination Fest.

Ringo's lightning normal attack, which I'll just call her lightning strike, while strong and versatile, has a weakness in that its targeting is slightly imprecise. With Nekomimineko's mechanic whereby hitting the critical point increases the damage and, if it's a killing blow, also doubles the item drop rate, it becomes important to have a skill that can land a pinpoint hit on the vitals.

Up until now, I've raised my mastery with swords, greatswords, daggers, ninja swords, and also fire magic using Master Torch. However, sword and greatsword skills generally focus on damage, and while there were multi-hit ninja sword skills, their attacks were either all over the place or dark elemental and thus difficult to utilize.

While I didn't plan on changing my general setup of dual-wielding Shiranui with a sub-

weapon, just this once I planned to use either Heat Knife or Wakizashi as the main to put the aim on using dagger skills.

To be specific, I considered using the dagger skill I just learned, Sextuple Stab, for the fight against the Golden Wild Zlimes. It's a skill that targets the same place with six stabs faster than the eye can see... but, well, the visual effect is really just that of a single stab, the system just cheats a little and counts the damage as a 6-hit-combo.

My basic intention was to use these skills and support Ringo, but, of course, I'd also hoped to defeat some Goldens and gain some levels if the opportunity presented itself.

To fight the monsters around these areas as a level 13 was definitely an act of suicide. If I didn't get to a decent level here, I might really end up being too scared of the monsters and not being able to leave the city.

That said, if it weren't for such a perfect opportunity like this, it might be better to stay at a lower level to grind weapon mastery, but for now I should probably prioritize leveling up.

The rate of gaining weapon mastery is adjusted by the level difference between you and the opponent. For each level that the opponent is higher, there is a 10% bonus.

When I, level 13, attack Master Torch, level 250, there is a 237 level difference, so I would gain mastery at almost 25 times the regular speed.

Hypothetically, if I were to reach level 150 by killing Goldens, there would still be a 100 level difference.

This means I would gain mastery at 11 times the regular speed. It would be less efficient, but Master Torch's supremacy is unshaken.

To begin with, based on the original game balance it would be suicide to challenge someone even twenty levels higher.

There was no adjustment for attack or defense based on level difference in this game, but as levels got higher, the monsters simply got stronger. Without rather good weapons, armor, and skills, it would generally be hard to overcome even a ten level difference.

On that point, the Golden Wild Zlimes only ran away and didn't attack at all, and while

they had extraordinary defence their HP was low and they had a special trait in that any attack, no matter how weak, would do at least one damage. Furthermore, hitting their weak point, the critical point, would do a minimum of two damage.

Anyone who could land a multi-hit skill with many hits had the chance of defeating them even if they were lacking in attack power.

After Ringo halted them with her lightning strikes, I would dash in and hit them in the vitals with Sextuple Stab. We'd aim for first place with that approach, and if there were room to spare I'd have Ringo hold back slightly on her attacks so that I could deal the killing blow and raise my level. This was our basic strategy against the Golden Wild Zlimes.

In addition, I had a small trick planned to make a trap using some items. But this was something that I hadn't even tried in-game, so there were no guarantees that it would be successful. I shouldn't count on it too much.

There's a huge element of luck in the Extermination Fest, not just in whether your preparations would work or not. Even if you had the ability to defeat Goldens, depending on the other competitors you could find your prey snatched away, making it so you couldn't even hunt properly.

Fighting between participants was forbidden so there's no need to worry about that, but whether we could make first place depended largely on whether we could get the jump on the other participants after it started and set up a good routine. It'd be bad if I ended up missing something from just thinking by myself.

With that in mind and with nothing to lose, I tried seeing if Ringo had any thoughts on these ideas, but, as expected, she didn't give any response outside of nodding and shaking her head.

Becoming slightly worried, I asked.

“Do you still remember the plan for after the fest starts?”

“...Follow, and shoot?”

She gave a very brief reply.

Though it made me question what my desperate explanations were for, well, it was the

truth.

I started thinking that Ringo was fine like this.

And, if we successfully made some money off this, then that should give us some leeway to start thinking about Ringo's future. I had no idea what she was thinking even now, but at least it seemed like she was surprisingly enthusiastic about this fest.

For now, we should probably be focused on combining our strengths and making it through this fest.

“It’s almost time, huh...”

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it seemed like the hustle of the streets had grown slightly.

I saw many people who looked like adventurers walking briskly towards the gate.

“Well then, why don’t we go too.”

Seeing Ringo give a small nod after hearing those words, we started walking towards the gate.

—Onwards, to the Deus Plains!

“This isn’t good...”

I might’ve been a bit naive.

There were way more people than I had expected. There was already a sea of people at our destination, the south gate. There were even normal townsfolk who were clearly not adventurers lined up there.

Since the extermination fest was limited to the first 50 sign-ups, I didn’t think there would be that many people, but the mass spawning this time was for the most EXP-efficient monster in the area, the Golden Wild Zlime.

I should’ve expected that people not participating in the fest would still head to the plains to farm EXP.

(Should we just take a detour out to the east or the west?)

The thought popped into my mind for a moment, but I quickly rejected it.

The Deus Plains past the south gate was the area around the capital with the weakest monsters. If I strayed outside of it without updating my level and equipment, there really would be the danger of dying.

Fundamentally, monsters to the south were weaker in Nekomimineko. This became clear if you looked at a map of the entire country, as the capital is in the middle and the Demon Lord’s Castle is in the north, while to the southeast lies the town of Ramlich.

However, the rule that areas further away from towns had stronger monsters still stood, so if you went further south from the Deus Plains the level of the monsters would increase slightly, until approximately three fields away in which there is a dungeon containing the strongest monster in the south at level 160.

As an aside, the boss there, King Butcher, was said to have killed the most Nekomimineko players out of all of the monsters, and the first time I ran into it I was turned into mincemeat with one strike.

Well, though he is a tough foe for swordsmen to deal with, the level 120 Slime Forest presents a much bigger threat in the current version of the game.

In addition to being difficult for melee characters to fight against, the slime monsters that appeared there would slowly multiply over time. If you left them alone for a few months in game time, then, surprise, the Slime Forest would spread into the capital!

It was one of the places that had to be dealt with sooner or later.

Anyways...

“Let’s push our way through to the outside!”

Right now wasn’t the time to be thinking about things so far in the future.

Cutting off any unnecessary thoughts, I pulled Ringo by her hand and dove towards the south gate.

Making it past the gate and into the field, the number of people diminished drastically. It seemed like the people flocking near the gate were indeed just normal residents of the capital.

There was no danger of being attacked by a Golden Wild Zlime, and as long as you could land an attack then there was a chance for you to defeat it even if you were a normal person or a child.

People thinking like that must’ve made their way to the gate, but lacking the bravery to actually step into the field, they end up just standing around by the gate.

On the other hand, while we were now standing in the field, there were no signs of monsters around.

I don’t know how everything managed to work itself out now that this world was real, but like in the game, as a precursor to a mass spawning, all of the monsters in the target area disappeared. That must be why normal people would even come so close to a field like this, and it also meant that we needed to use this time effectively.

“...Let’s go.”

Prompting Ringo, we made our way out of the wave of people near the gate and

headed into the depths of the plains.

Though there was probably no need to, I naturally tried to choose a path that kept us out of sight.

Once the number of people thinned, I took a breath, and...

“From here on, we’re running.”

Giving notice to Ringo, we start moving for real.

The people loitering by the gate, as well some of the other adventurers, were planning on dealing with the Goldens as a big group.

It’s true that with more people you could block off more of the Goldens’ escape routes, increasing the chance of defeating them. However, that meant that the chance of landing the last hit was greatly decreased for any one person. With Nekomimineko’s system where the person who landed the killing blow got all of the EXP and drops, if there was a way for one to kill the Goldens alone, it would be better to avoid other people.

The Deus Plains was a very open space, and with the short grass, some scattered bushes, and the few large boulders that acted as landmarks, there was not much blocking one’s field of view.

After running for a while, we saw a few parties of adventurers with the same thought as us, but there weren’t many of them.

Only up to 50 people could participate in the Extermination Fest. If most of them had formed teams of 3, then there wouldn’t even be a total of 20 teams. I was quite worried when I saw the mess at the gate, but it looked like the plan wouldn’t need to be adjusted too much.

“Ringo, stop for a bit!”

By the way, we weren’t just running around doing nothing. Every time we found somewhere that looked like a monster spawn point, I would place a few marking items around it.

“...What are you doing?”

For some reason Ringo’s gaze seemed to be less than friendly, but this was something that we needed to do.

“If I mark them, it’ll be easier once it starts right? And if I surround it like this, then it’ll also make the other adventurers think twice before interfering.”

“...Souma, cheater.”

Pretending that Ringo’s voice coming from behind me hadn’t reached my ears, I finished placing all of the items and stopped our legs.

“.....It’s almost time. Let’s wait here until it starts.”

We somehow managed to get quite far in. If we went any further then we’d have ended up leaving the field. There weren’t any other characters nearby, and more importantly, the shape of the boulder in front of us seemed familiar.

If I remembered correctly, there should have been a spawn point right there.

“Ringo, the first one should show up near that boulder there. I’m trusting you with the first hit.”

I said, and while, like always, I couldn’t tell where Ringo was looking at at all, she did reply with a nod.

Normally, monsters didn’t spawn in view of the player... but during a mass spawning event, one of the few “special events”, was an exception. Monsters would spawn regardless of everything, and the time between respawns was drastically reduced.

If all went well, there wouldn’t be any hindrances and the first one would show up while we were ready and waiting for it. From that we could hope to get a grasp on the knack for hunting Goldens.

While waiting for the mass spawning to start, I checked over my equipment.

Although my armor was still super weak, given the low risk of being attacked, with the exception of stamina rings I swapped out almost all of my other rings from defense up to elemental attack boosting ones.

I'd finally learned fire magic, so what was wrong with giving it a try if there were a chance.

My weapons were Shiranui and Wakizashi as usual. Of the weapons I owned, Shiranui had the highest attack, and Wakizashi was second after that, so I was technically using my two strongest weapons.

Actually, I had tried to lend the Wakizashi to Ringo again, but Ringo wanted the Heat Knife instead. I thought I had seen her looking intently at the knife when I had her try it out with her lightning strikes, but it seemed like she'd taken a liking to the pure red blade that gave off warmth.

...She might have some dangerous tastes.

As long as she was attacking with her lightning strikes, she wouldn't earn dagger mastery or fire magic mastery even with the Heat Knife equipped, but still, the Heat Knife had a decent attack stat.

No matter how strong her lightning strikes were, I couldn't imagine them breaking through the Goldens' defense and doing more than 2 damage, so whichever weapon she used didn't really matter.

Just then, after looking at who even knows what she was looking at for all this time, Ringo raised her head and readied the Heat Knife.

Looking at the time, it was already just ten seconds until the expected mass spawning.

I also hurriedly followed her lead.

"Ringo, when it appears, hit it with a lightning strike with your full power. Once it stops moving, I'll rush at it. ...I beg you, please don't hit me, okay?"

Ringo replied to my slightly joking words with a steady nod.

"...Nn. I'll pray, that I don't hit you."

Don't just pray, actually try to avoid hitting me! I wanted to shout back, but it was time.

Specks of light gathered and formed into a living being.

-A golden body like a Puyo Puyo Gummy, and the two nekomimi-like bumps that were the trademarks of a Zlime.

There was no doubt about it, this was a Golden Wild Zlime!

“Ringo!”

When I shouted out, Ringo was already moving.

Lightning strikes gushed out from the tip of her knife.

(...It's fast!)

It was a strike so fast that I probably wouldn't even be able to dodge, but the golden Zlime was able to react to it.

But the lightning strike doesn't just fly in a straight line. It's more like five bolts of lightning shot off at the same time, each in a slightly different direction. One of those, the one that jumped the furthest horizontally, grazed the Zlime's body.

Even though it's a very strong attack, the lightning strike was a multi-hit attack. When spread out across five bolts, each individual bolt wasn't all that strong. Indeed, it was unable to break through the Zlime's defense, dealing exactly 1 damage.

But there, without a moment's gap, Ringo let out a second, a third lightning strike.

(She's good!)

Ringo continued her quick barrage of lightning strikes, focusing more on cutting off possible escape routes rather than hitting them for damage. While the Zlime was able to read the path of the attacks, with the lightning being spread out and the irregular paths that the lightning bolts took, it wasn't able to dodge all of them.

Or rather, with Ringo leading it skillfully, she was finally able to land a clean hit-

Wait, this is no time to be spaced out watching her!

I used the Rapid Cancel Dash to close in on the Zlime, its movements completely stopped after taking that direct hit. Probably out of consideration for me, Ringo also stopped shooting off lightning strikes.

There were no obstacles between me and the Golden Wild Zlime. Using Step cancelling, I shortened the distance until I was in range for my skill.

The Zlime still couldn't move!

Short cancelling the final Step, I activated the dagger skill Sextuple Stab.

Nevertheless, the Zlime stayed frozen.

(I can make it!)

If the enemy still hasn't moved at this distance, then there was no way this attack could miss.

Holding the dagger in a reverse grip, I plunged it into the Zlime..

“Huh?”

And cut right through its body.

(W-What the...)

Turning around in surprise, there was no longer a Zlime to be seen, just a few remaining particles of light. But even those were quickly scattered by the wind.

I was struck by confusion for bit, but after a few seconds I figured it out.

(Ah, I see.)

In Nekomimineko, after a monster was defeated, its corpse would remain for a little while. It appeared that, even before I had started my attack, the Golden Wild Zlime had already perished.

No wonder it didn't move at all!

No, you see, this was just the first time so I was a bit too nervous, but in a sense, everything went just as planned!

I desperately tried to come up with excuses in my mind as Ringo walked up to me.

Then, slowly, she gave a suggestion.

“...Next time, should I, hold back?”

While feeling emotional that Ringo had already learned to be able to show concern for others, I shook my head.

...Ringo, you know.

Sometimes kindness can hurt people too.

With Ringo's lightning strikes and my wonderful charge, we defeated the first Golden (though, in a sense, we failed hard) and, without waiting for the Golden to respawn at that spawn point, went off in search of other Goldens.

This was the plan I had come up with beforehand, having a grasp of the rules behind monster spawns as well as the number of monsters that would appear during mass spawnings.

The rules behind monster spawning in Nekomimineko were extremely simple.

There were specified points on the map, called spawn points, where monsters appeared from, and for each one, it had a setting for “the ID and likelihood of each monster group appearing” as well as the “respawn time”, for example:

[#1 50%, #2 30%, #11 20%, Respawn 600s]

If #1 was a Zlime, #2 was an Ugly Zlime, and #11 was a Zlime and an Ugly Zlime together, then at that point there was a 50% chance that a Zlime would spawn, a 30% chance that an Ugly Zlime would spawn, and a 20% chance that both would spawn.

Since the respawn time was 600 seconds, new monsters would only appear from that spawn point 600 seconds, or 10 minutes, after the previous monsters had been defeated.

However, during mass spawnings those settings pretty much lost all of their meaning. Once the mass spawning flag had been set, whether the monsters selected to be spawned were #1 or #2 or #11, the monster that appeared would be the event monster. Right now the mass spawning was for Golden Wild Zlimes, so no matter what would normally be spawning, all of the spawn points were guaranteed to spawn only Goldens, and nothing else would appear.

Even this had been the source of a very Nekomimineko-esque bug. There had been a mass spawning of Goblins in a certain early-game dungeon, and not only the random monsters in the dungeon but even the boss monster had become a Goblin.

Typically, boss monsters and event monsters were the only ones that wouldn't be overwritten during a mass spawning, but someone had forgotten to give that

important boss monster the boss flag, and so all of the monsters had become Goblins. It's the type of bug that was not rare to find in Nekomimineko.

But as a result of that, while it was simple to clear the dungeon, the boss didn't drop what it was supposed to drop and it became impossible to fight that boss a second time, not to mention that one of its drops was an event item and so it became impossible to progress in that event. It was a disaster.

Well, putting behind this talk about everyday bugs, there was another big change during mass spawnings in addition to the change in monster type. All of the spawn points were changed to have a respawn time of 300 seconds, and it became possible for multiple monsters spawned from the same point to be alive at once.

In other words, whether or not you defeated the monsters that had been spawned, a new monster would appear every 5 minutes. This was quite a brutal setting.

According to the Nekomimineko wiki, outdoor fields had an average of 50 spawn points. That meant that every 5 minutes, each of the 50 groups of monsters would increase their numbers by 1.

Of course, there were no problems right at the start of the Elimination Fest. You could easily clean up the monsters that appeared nearby, and it felt like this event would be a piece of cake. However, as time went on, the number of monsters that fell through the cracks increased, and the number of adventurers that could fight slowly decreased due to injuries or lack of MP.

The Elimination Fest that began with 50 monsters vs 50 adventurers, after 30 minutes, had turned into an Elimination Fest with 200 monsters vs 20 adventurers. This was a pattern that was not at all uncommon.

However, monsters only appeared a total of 10 times, and they stopped spawning 45 minutes after the start of the event.

That's why sometimes the Fest would be announced to be over before 2 hours had passed from the start of the mass spawning, if all of the monsters had been defeated, but unless the player and the other participants were all rather high leveled, such a situation usually wouldn't happen.

Although I had no idea if everything would go the same way in this world as it did in game, I made my plans based on this information.

There were approximately 50 spawn points on the field, and from each of them monsters would spawn 10 times. That meant that, in the end, the total number of Golden Wild Zlimes that would appear today was around 500.

If we could perfectly defeat 250 of these 500, then our first place spot would be all but secured, but, of course, that didn't seem very realistic. Defeating 80 would probably be solid, but I felt like that might even be wishing for too much.

...That's why, 50.

From my analysis, if we could defeat 50 before the end of the Fest, I think there might be a slight chance that we could reach first place.

And so, if we had to defeat 50 in these 2 hours, then we would need to kill them at a high rate of 1 every 2 or so minutes. Waiting for them to respawn every 5 minutes would be way too slow.

Going straight north, back along the path we came when it started, would've been fine too, but I wanted to leave the places I marked for as long as I could. As if trying to break through in the northwest direction, we jogged to find a different spawn point.

“I’m pretty sure something should’ve spawned somewhere around here...”

I muttered to myself, and Ringo, running beside me, whispered.

“...There is. Something golden.”

“Eh?”

Hearing that, I looked forward, but I couldn’t see anything.

But,

“...This way.”

With Ringo leading the way for once, we indeed came upon a Golden.

I had to wonder if leveling up also improved your vision.

While thinking such idiotic thoughts, I readied my Wakizashi at the Golden in front of

my eyes.

Dropping my speed, I called in a hushed voice.

“Ringo, attack on my signal!”

Escaping monsters like the Golden Wild Zlime were often not just triggered by “being attacked”, but also by “the player approaching within a certain range”.

As for just how close that range was before they would escape, I’d already mastered it subconsciously.

We’d approach as close as we could, and Ringo would shoot a lightning strike.

Then I’d circle around to the side and end it with a Sextuple Stab!

While having a staring contest with the cautious Zlime, we closed in, and...

“Now!”

The moment I yelled out, I started circling out sideways with the Rapid Cancel Dash.

But,

“Uwah!”

The lightning strike brushed right beside me, making it difficult for me to charge in.

We had found out from testing it on the boulder nearby, but the power of the lightning strikes did indeed increase after she leveled up. Before, when the bolts hit the boulder, they’d at most cause some cracks to form, but after she leveled up it grew to being able to take big chunks off the boulder.

If I were to get hit by something like that, I’d be helpless to do anything.

However, even with such a powered-up lightning strike, it still wasn’t able to break through the Golden’s defenses. I thought it might’ve been able to do so now that she’d leveled up, but it wouldn’t deal anything more than the usual 1 damage.

After many more strikes had scraped the Golden, its movements finally stopped.

(Now's my chance!)

Holding back my fear, I charged at the Golden!

“...Should I, hold, back?”

After the battle, as I stood there with my shoulders drooping, Ringo reached out to me.

Well, the conclusion was that I had landed the hit, and this time I was able to successfully attack the Golden.

A-Although it was just a corpse!

And I also wasn't anywhere close to being able to aim at its vitals!

But it was definitely a step forwards.

With resolution, I shook my head at Ringo's suggestion.

Of course, in the vertical direction!

You see, since it was so easy to just defeat them, in order for Ringo to grow and also for us to get first place, it was essential that she control her output so that I could properly land Sextuple Stab... probably.

According to the Nekomimineko wiki, the Golden Wild Zlime apparently had a fixed 15HP.

So 3 clean hits or an accumulated 5 or 10 scratches with her lightning strikes would be enough to bring one down.

“If it seems like they're one hit from death, can you pull back a bit and make it easier for me to approach?”

I don't mean to brag, but if I were to use my skills freely, then I could probably be faster than the Golden.

The only reason I wasn't able to make it in time just now was because I was scared by

Ringo's lightning strikes.

If she could keep them under control, then even I should be able to land a few hits!

Golden Wild Zlime, the next time we meet will be your last!!

In my case, it's generally a flag for failure when I say such things so confidently, but just this time, that wasn't so.

In fact, from then on, everything went so well that it was almost scary.

Whether due to the effects of her *holding back* showing, I was able to attack the next Golden with room to spare... though, of course, it was already a corpse.

Then, I tried to challenge myself to hit the critical point, which for the Zlimes was the small mole that always existed right on their forehead (there were also some who say it's hair).

The first time was... a failure.

In order to hit it on the forehead I needed to approach its front side, but while I was flustered trying to find where its front side was, the corpse disappeared.

However, the next time, my aim was just slightly off and I ended up just missing the critical point, but being so close gave me a big boost to my confidence.

Then, the third one after I started my attempts, I was finally able to successfully land a Sextuple Stab in the middle of the Golden's corpse's forehead, on the critical point.

The next one, too; I hit the dead Golden's forehead.

The next one was also a success!

And also the next one, as I continued to rack up my successes and success rate.

As we progressed smoothly in our hunt for Goldens, the coordination between me and Ringo would improve each time.

Until, finally, the 13th one...

“Sextuple Stab!!”

At least, I successfully landed an attack on a living Zlime!

I wasn't anywhere close to being able to accurately aim for its forehead since it was still moving, but after taking the 6 damage from Sextuple Stab, the already weakened Zlime was killed.

Right after that Golden turned into particles and disappeared, I felt a shock run through my body.

-Level up!

Energy sprung from the depths of my body, and I couldn't sit still. Wanting to try out this power, I then landed the killing blow on the next 3 Zlimes.

Of course, I couldn't break through the Golden's defenses, and with how fast a living Golden moved I knew it would be impossible to aim for its vitals with my capability, but after defeating those 3 I felt my body evolving again.

Remembering that I had the Status Sticker, I tried checking, and after defeating just 4 of them, my level had already jumped up to 70.

I also tried looking at Ringo's level, and hers had become 82.

As expected of Nekomimineko, known for its “exquisite game balance”. These bonus monsters weren't half bad at destroying the balance.

However, Golden Wild Zlimes were only level 100. Since you stopped getting experience from monsters too many levels below yours, the highest level you could reach by killing these was at most around level 100.

After finishing off another one and seeing that I'd reached level 72, I decided to prioritize hunting over gaining levels.

I could always grind levels another time, but the chance to get such a large amount of money didn't come that often.

Ceding all of the experience to Ringo, we devoted ourselves to efficiency. As a result, the hunting progressed swimmingly and, by the time 30 minutes had passed since the start of the Fest, we already had a total of 22 kills under our belts. Taking into account the slow start, it was quite an accomplishment.

If we continued at this pace, never mind the 2 hour mark, we might have been able to exceed our goal of 50 even by the 45 minute mark when monsters stopped spawning.

It was also really encouraging that, while doing this, I'd started to think that we might be able to take first place even without working that hard.

Even with 50 spawn points, Deus Plains was quite a big field. Just moving from one spawn point to a neighboring spawn point took quite a bit of time. It was not very realistic going around to a bunch of different points to rack up a large score.

In which case , it was possible that we, who were hunting the most efficiently out of everyone, would have the most points. Our biggest victory probably came from choosing to hunt far from the entrance, using the southern side as our camp.

We hardly bumped into any of our competitors, the other participants in the Fest, and as a bonus there were many spawn points that hadn't even been touched. After some time had passed, perhaps the number of Goldens that slipped through the cracks was increasing, but we'd started running into many cases where two or more Goldens would be at the same spawn point. The situation would only improve, and I had high expectations for the places that I had marked with items before the start.

Surprisingly, this might have been a cinch.

Right after I started to have such thoughts, an anomaly struck.

“...Something’s strange.”

We’d been walking for around 5 minutes now, but there were no Zlimes to be seen.

I tried checking with Ringo to see if I had just missed them, but it seemed like she hadn't seen any either. Considering the situation up to now, where two or sometimes even three Zlimes had been waiting at each spawn point, this was strange.

Perhaps, unlike in the game, monsters stopped spawning after 30 minutes instead of 45 minutes.

When I was just about to start feeling anxious, Ringo muttered out loud.

“...There.”

Hearing her voice, I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart.

It was a distance away, but the golden Zlime revealed itself to my eyes.

“That’ll be our next target. Let’s get ’em.”

Having relaxed, such obvious words that went without saying slipped out of my mouth, as I approached the Zlime with faintly vigorous steps.

But when I came close enough to be able to clearly make out the Zlime’s face...

“H, huh...?”

—A gust of wind raced across the plains.

Something flowing slid in from the side and, for an instant, crossed paths with the Golden.

The shadow that quickly flew through only caught my eyes for an instant, before I immediately moved my eyes back towards the Golden...

“You’re, kidding me...”

The healthy Golden Wild Zlime had been split cleanly in two, right down the center of its body.

After a short amount of time, the two halves of the Zlime turned into particles of light and disappeared.

“...Ringo?”

Feeling a light tug on my clothes, I turned around. There, standing beside me, Ringo had grabbed the edge of my clothes with a slightly terrified look.

An existence that was able to shock Ringo, someone who rarely reacted no matter what she saw, this much.

That was just how frightening the suddenly-split-in-half Golden Wild Zlime was... of course not.

It was the person who had shot towards the Golden with such speed that I mistook it as a gust of wind, then proceeded to split it in half in an instant.

Someone possessing the ability to pierce through the Golden's defenses, which didn't even budge when faced with the level-upped Ringo's lightning strikes, and who was able to split a moving target right down the center at such speeds.

Even in Nekomimineko, there weren't many who were capable of this.

"You're..."

A dry voice leaked out of my lips.



Facing me, while having accomplished the superhuman act of splitting a Golden Wild Zlime in two, was a single girl whose eyes were slack with boredom.

“They really are quite slow. This is making me want to yawn.”

There existed only one person who could say such words about the fastest monster around the capital, the Golden Wild Zlime.

The person standing there, was, of course.

“Mitsuki Hisame...”

As you are aware, it’s the “BAKAAAAA!” person.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki >>> Nekomimineko Glossary

The Reason Behind a Lack of Stock (Quest)

This is a quest that is triggered when the player enters the item shop while level 20 or higher. The request is to procure 50 antidotes, which have been sold out, and while you could collect them normally, they could be bought like normal until level 19, so it is possible to clear the event the moment it is triggered if you buy 50 in advance. Who would have thought, the real reason it's sold out was...

Six Split Petals (Quest)

This is a battle royale for the stamps of the six families by their representatives. You become the representative for the family you choose, and need to defeat the representatives from the remaining five families in order to collect all of the stamps. This will be a tough fight against various kinds of specialists, you think, but actually, since it is possible to accept the request from multiple families at once, you just need to become the representative for all six families to collect all of the stamps without a single fight.

Weed (Item)

There are a total of ten different colors, and the effect depends on the color. There are various effects like healing or curing statuses or buffing or adding elements, but the strength of the effects is very weak so it is not practical to use. However, if you choose the right color for the right target, this could make for a surprisingly good present.

Chapter 5

The Final Ploy

— 1 —

“Mitsuki Hisame...”

The memory of her running away while screaming “Baka” after being fooled by me in our duel was still fresh in my mind. Just why was she here?

Hisame took one glance at me after hearing me call her name, but without saying anything she walked towards the place where the Golden Wild Zlime she killed lay.

With a rather disinterested attitude, she bent down and picked something up.

“No way...”

I stared in disbelief at the object Hisame picked up.

It was something that I’d seen before... or rather, it was a glistening golden object that I was all too familiar with.

Its name readily came out of Hisame’s mouth.

“Yet another Gold Zlime Coin.”

The apathetic way in which she said that dealt me yet another huge blow.

The Gold Zlime Coin was a drop item from Golden Wild Zlimes, and also an item that could be turned in as part of the collect request for this Extermination Fest.

However, its drop rate was low, at a mere 10%.

But that small golden coin carried a big meaning in this event.

Generally, destroy and collect requests were engineered to give the same expected

reward for each enemy defeated.

The Gold Zlime Coin had a drop rate of 10%, so compared to simply defeating a single Golden Wild Zlimes, it was 10x harder to obtain one.

And that's why the amount of reward it brought was 10x that of destroying one Golden Wild Zlime.

If we looked at the actual numbers, the reward for destroying one Golden Wild Zlime was 10000E, but the reward for each Gold Zlime Coin was 100000E.

But, being an item with only a 10% drop rate, it shouldn't be very easy to get...

(Oh, the critical point...!)

I had thought that Hisame split the Zlime right down the middle just to show off her skills.

However, that wasn't all it was.

Cutting it right down the middle meant cutting it through the critical point on its forehead.

With the bonus of the critical attack, the probability of the enemies Hisame defeated dropping items doubled.

To see what the result of that was, it would be simpler to consider the case if one had defeated 100 Goldens. If they were all just defeated normally, then the expected number of gold coins obtained from 100 Goldens would be 10. The reward for destroying them would be 100 times 10000, which is a million, and the reward for collecting gold coins would be 10 times 100000, which is another million. Together, one could expect a reward of two million.

However, defeating all of the Goldens by slicing through their critical points like Hisame did would raise the expected number of gold coins obtained up to 20. In that case, the reward for destroying them would still be 100 times 10000, which is a million, but the reward for collecting gold coins would now be 20 times 100000, which is two million, leading to a grand total of three million. As a result, the expected amount of reward from each Golden ends up being 1.5x compared to defeating them normally.

(Damn it. This was completely outside of my expectations.)

I had been caught by my preconception from the game that the system of critical hits increasing the drop rate was solely for players to exploit.

Indeed, there have been characters in the game who said that killing monsters in their vitals made items drop more frequently.

It was common sense among adventurers, whether they were inside the game system or living in this world.

Not considering that other people would also be aiming for that must mean that I still hadn't broken out of my bad habit of treating the people who lived in this world as NPCs.

(But wait, this isn't something I'd normally take into consideration anyways.)

Even I, with countless skills under my command, still couldn't accomplish something as absurd as hitting a moving Golden Wild Zlime in its critical point.

Or rather, out of all of the characters in Nekomimineko, Hisame was probably the only one who could do something like that.

Out of all of the famous characters in the game, just why did *she* have to join this festival.

I felt just how unfair the world was.

(Thinking about it, isn't Hisame, like, perfectly built for this fest...?)

The strength to overwhelm the high defense of the Goldens in one hit.

The speed and skill to chase down an escaping Golden and accurately hit its critical point.

And, the ability to move quickly between the countless spawn points.

Possessing all three of those points, Hisame had the potential to reach a high score far exceeding my predictions.

I said that even 50 might be enough, but that was outrageous. Even 80 seems dubious. If I seriously wanted to win against Hisame, I started thinking that it would be impossible without defeating 100, no, without defeating around 120.

“I will no longer challenge you to life-or-death duels.”

Right then, after putting the coin away in a bag, Hisame suddenly spoke out.

She had her usual air of indifference around her, but, could it be...

“However, you didn’t prohibit competing against others for something else. That’s why, I haven’t broken our...”

“Could it be, that you’re still sulking about losing to me?”

From my impressions of her in the game, Hisame wasn’t the type to proactively participate in events like this, and for someone who used expensive Teleportation Stones like they were nothing, I couldn’t imagine her being in it for the money.

I couldn’t believe it, but was she participating in this in order to...

“...You sure seem to be enjoying leisurely hunting monsters in the corners.”

She clearly avoided the topic! Did she actually regret losing to me and come here to take revenge?

However, even under my suspicious gaze, Hisame didn’t so much as twitch.

There was nothing unnatural at all about her behavior or facial expressions. It was a perfect poker face. The only thing that was different from normal were her cat ears, busily wiggling all over the place.

Even while her cat ears were moving around at a blinding speed, Hisame continued to talk calmly.

“However, there’s no need for you to continue any further. The victor has already been established.”

But when she said that, her cat ears proudly stood up straight.

I had a bad feeling about this.

“...Is that, so? You never know who the winner is until the points have been counted.”

I tried saying something back, but it seemed quite meek compared to her confidence.

And while I was trying to shake her up a bit, her cat ears stood straight without moving.

It seemed that she really wasn't disturbed by it.

“If you think that way, then struggle all you wish. I will be finishing up very soon.”

“Finishing up?”

The question that I involuntarily let loose caused the slightest response from her cat ears.

“...I will probably be returning to the city after another 10 minutes or so. I will wait for you there. Don't make me wait for too long this time.”

Leaving just that, Hisame immediately turned her back.

In the same way that she appeared, at a speed that could only barely be followed by my eyes, she dashed off towards the direction opposite the one she came from.

“...Souma.”

I stared dumbly in the direction she disappeared in, until I was brought back to my senses by my name being called from beside me.

Ringo's eyes, definitely filled with unease, were looking up at me.

Since the unexpressive girl was showing this much expression, she must have been very worried.

I had to say something here, confidently, so as to soften her anxiety.

“It's alright, Ringo.”

I looked Ringo straight in the eyes, placed my hand on her shoulder, and firmly said.

“Even second place gives 3x the reward!”

...For some reason, I got a slightly disgusted look.

Though I had said what I said, I did still want to aim as high as we could and earn as much money as we could. For the time being, I decided to go over the current status again and choose a plan of action.

First of all, we shouldn't try to contest Hisame.

There was no way we could compete with her extermination speed and movement speed. From now on, we should move so as not to run into her.

We had bumped into Hisame slightly southwest of the center of the field. She had come from the northeast, and left heading slightly south of due west. From that, it was possible to predict, to an extent, how she would move.

Hisame had said that I was “enjoying leisurely hunting monsters in the corners”. That meant that Hisame was probably keeping track of our actions through the Seeker's Ring.

She could've come met us much earlier if she had wanted to, so the reason why we didn't encounter her until now must be that she hadn't felt like it.

But, thinking about it another way, why did we run into her with this timing?

One hypothesis was that she had started from the opposite side of us, defeating slimes starting from the north, and that everywhere north of here had been pretty much hunted empty.

A one person road roller, or maybe it would be more apt to call it a one person carpet bomber.

Such a frightening thought would be inconceivable for anyone other than her, but one would strangely start thinking that it might just be possible with Hisame's mobility.

With that hypothesis in mind, it might be possible that she moved in a zigzag between the west and the east as she slowly moved from the north towards the south.

At the very least, that would explain her coming from the northeast and leaving towards the southwest. I had pretty much no basis for this, but we should just try thinking about it with this as the premise.

If that were the case, how should we move?

One choice could be to run full speed towards the north.

Even Hisame couldn't defeat monsters that hadn't spawned yet. In the northmost part where she started, it was possible that most of the monsters hadn't yet spawned by the time Hisame passed by. Even if there weren't any spawn points with 10 monsters left, it might be possible to find a large number of spawn points with around 6 monsters left.

However, that was probably a bad plan.

There were many participants other than Hisame in the north, and it was even possible that Hisame could have backtracked to clean up what she missed. Moving also took time, so if we ended up with no results then it would be just disastrous.

It seemed that there was no choice but to try going for the spawn points I had marked.

While Hisame had left towards the southwest, if she were moving as I hypothesized, then it would still take some time before she reached the south edge. On the other hand, we had started hunting slightly east of the south edge and moved through the southwest before turning and heading towards the center. If Hisame were to move as I thought, there was a possibility that there were points neither we nor Hisame had touched in the southeast.

But if other adventurers had already hunted all of the monsters around there, moving from the southeast edge towards anywhere else would take a lot of time. The risk if this plan were a miss was also high.

(Even then, let's go with this.)

We'd go back to the original plan. I'd already decided that we wouldn't try to compete directly with Hisame.

Thus, the best plan would probably be to head towards the southeast, which seemed like the place where we could obtain the most points at the moment. What would decide if this was a hit or a miss would be how much of an effect the items had.

“Ringo, let’s go back south. In the south, there might be points that nobody has touched yet.”

Ringo gave a small nod at my words.

Furthermore,

“...Split, up?”

As if feeling threatened by Hisame’s presence, she even gave such a suggestion.

However, I immediately shook my head sideways.

“Nah, it’s better if we stick together. The way we’ve been doing it up to now is probably the best.”

For a moment, I thought about splitting up to increase efficiency, but that would probably have the opposite effect.

At least, I don’t feel like I would be able to defeat a Golden Wild Zlime by myself.

“...Mm.”

It seemed like Ringo also realized that our combination had been going smoothly, as she was quickly convinced.

“For now, let’s prioritizing moving over searching for Goldens. We’re going at full speed.”

Checking that Ringo nodded once more, I started moving towards the southeast with Rapid Cancel Dash.

Frighteningly, Ringo's full speed dash was faster than mine, so, when taking into account the breaks I needed to take, she was able to keep up with the Rapid Cancel Dash, and we progressed smoothly.

As we moved towards the southeast like that, we saw a group of adventurers coming from in front of us. It was a group of three, but all of the members had the same tired look on their face. From their steps and their appearance, it seemed like they were about to pull back.

“Hello. Are you heading back?”

If they were pulling back then there was no harm in reaching out to them. While we didn't have much time, there might have still been some information we could gain. I proactively approached them and called out.

As I did so, the three of them looked over amongst themselves as dry smiles drifted over their faces.

“Yeah. Even though there's still time left...”

“But after seeing something like that...”

“It really takes away your motivation...”

Then, after a short conversation that only the three of them could understand, their tired look took over again.

I had no idea what had happened, but it seemed like they had seen something quite shocking.

“Hey, you guys, if you're gonna go any further then you'd better make sure you prepare yourselves.”

In the end, the man who seemed like the representative for the group left behind those words as the group was leaving.

“Jeez, I can't believe anyone would do something so horrible.”

“Who knows, it might be the work of Dark Cultists.”

While the encounter ended without any trouble, the words I heard behind me made me feel strangely restless.

“...Souma?”

“Mm. ...Let's keep going.”

Still, we could only continue onwards.

I responded to Ringo's uncertain voice, and picked up the pace.

“W-What is, that?”

Even from a distance, that strange sight was obviously bizarre, leading me to unconsciously raise my voice.

Smack in the middle of the plains was a wriggling golden mass, seemingly surrounded by small black spots.

An ominous object that brought unease just by looking at it had appeared in the plains.

“Wait, no way, could that be...”

But, as we approached, its true identity made me inhale deeply.

The golden thing squirming in the middle was a large gathering of Golden Wild Zlimes, and the black things surrounding it were...

“Kuul... Skulls!”

They were the event items *made to use as markings* that I had scattered around the spawn points before the Extermination Fest had started, the pure black skulls that I had retrieved from around the item shop employee's house.

No NPC would approach those fashionable skulls, the Kull Skulls. Actually, not just NPCs, but even monsters wouldn't. In that case, what would happen if we used that special property and surrounded a monster with skulls? The answer to that lay right in front of our eyes.

The Goldens that spawned inside the circle of skulls, unable to break through, ran back and forth within that small circle. Looking at it carefully, they were all trying to go towards the center of the circle to get as far away from the skulls as possible, but were repeatedly pushed out by other Goldens. As this continued, it appeared as though a large golden mass was writhing around.

“...Souma.”

Watching this scene from behind me, Ringo called my name, seemingly wanting to say something. I didn't answer her, but I could understand very well how she was feeling right now.

It would have been a different matter if they had any ranged attacks, but for Goldens who only had melee attacks, they had no way of breaking through this circle of skulls. Being surrounded by skulls, the only area in which the Goldens were allowed to roam was a circle with a radius of around merely 2 meters. The sight of close to ten Goldens desperately trying to escape really made you pity them.

If it was going to be like this, not being able to move at all would have still been better. While they were monsters, I regretted having done such a cruel thing.

I silently approached, but the Goldens had no way to run. Having exhausted all options, all of the Goldens looked up at me while their golden bodies trembled, as their round eyes tried their hardest to say “I'm not a bad Zlime!”.

“...I'm sorry.”

I didn't mean to have done this so half-heartedly. At the very least, as I said to myself, I carefully picked up a skull and, fully intent on repenting, I *pushed the skull forwards*.

As the skulls moved closer, the space that was available to the Goldens decreased until there was only enough space for a single Golden to stand in. Losing ground, the Goldens escaped to the only safe place left for them, on top of the heads of their companions, and, as a result, the Goldens brilliantly stacked up vertically, forming a golden Zlime Tower.



Seeing this scene...

“Hell yeah! Now they can’t move anymore! All your EXP are belong to me!!”

I raised a cheer at the completed Zlime Tower, and began the challenge of crashing the tower with high spirits.

Like that, an hour finally passed since the start of the Fest.

We had somehow managed to extend the number of kills from 22 at the 30 minute mark to triple that amount, 66. Of course, this was largely due to the effects of the skull trap.

Out of the five traps I had laid around the middle towards the southeast of the map, one of them had unfortunately been hunted clean, but the remaining four yielded a large amount of Goldens.

For some reason, Ringo was being uncooperative, but defeating the trapped Goldens with my Sextuple Stab was best anyways. Without much effort, we were able to obtain a large amount of points.

Having killed close to 30 Goldens just from the traps, we rode the momentum and started hunting the nearby spawn points.

It seemed that Hisame hadn’t come to the south edge yet. While it wasn’t possible to kill them all without missing any, unlike with the traps, we were able to defeat more Goldens than I had expected, further extending our score.

By the way, we also got an unexpected drop.

The Ninja Sword [Golden Sakura].

This was a rare drop from Golden Wild Zlimes with an estimated 0.1% drop rate. It was a strong item, but not one of the items included in the collect request.

Honestly, just this one time I would’ve preferred getting a Gold Zlime Coin instead, but I couldn’t complain about it. Statistically speaking, to get a single one after hunting this much could be said to be quite lucky.

Gratefully putting it to use, I had Ringo equip it.

Using Golden Sakura, which was markedly stronger than the Heat Knife, she was able to defeat the Goldens in one hit, and the efficiency of our hunting increased... was, of course, nothing more than a fantasy, but she seemed to have taken a liking to it.

There were really many unknowns about Ringo's strength, and it still wasn't clear whether or not she'd been able to surpass the strength of Princess Shelmia during the Royal Capital Invasion event.

Taking into account the properties of her lightning strikes, Ringo was quite strong, but she didn't seem to be commanding the same kind of overwhelming strength displayed during the Royal Capital Invasion event.

The Royal Capital Invasion was a level 100 event, so Princess Shelmia had been battling bird monsters that were around level 90. I couldn't imagine her lightnings strikes now being powerful enough to take down one of those monsters in a single hit, given how much it was doing to those boulders.

In which case, that Shelmia was either higher leveled, better equipped, or had received some kind of a powerup for the event.

Anyways.

Including getting that Golden Sakura, I was confident that we were able to achieve a result as close to ideal as we could with the limited amount of time and resources we had.

However.

(It's still, not enough...)

Considering Hisame's attitude, 66 was just too unsafe.

We searched around to see if there were any left, but the Goldens were nowhere left to be found. On the way, we bumped into many other groups of participants in the Fest, but they weren't having any luck either.

Even though it was just slightly past an hour into the Fest, everyone seemed to be calling it off and heading back to the city. There was such an unnatural absence of

Goldens that it was hard to believe that they had all finished spawning already.

Had all of the Golden Wild Zlimes really been killed already?

Indeed, even in the game there had been situations where, when a single person defeated a large amount of monsters, the rest of the people targeted the monsters that person missed, eventually eradicating the mass spawning monster.

(Is it, impossible now...)

Thinking about it, we had reached our original goal of killing 50.

While I hadn't expected abnormalities like Hisame, this was already more than enough of an accomplishment. It still wasn't even guaranteed that we wouldn't be able to take first place.

Looking at my watch, the time was 3:11pm.

It had already been more than 10 minutes since we last saw a Zlime.

All of the Zlimes had probably already been defeated now.

We'd worked more than hard enough.

It was definitely the right choice to end it here.

"Well then Ringo, should we..."

'Go back,' I was about to say, but my words suddenly stopped.

(...Wait, just wait, it's not over yet.)

I remembered something.

Somehow, the Guild knows when all of the monsters have been defeated, and in that case they were supposed to make an announcement that the Extermination Fest was over.

Since that hadn't happened yet, that meant that there were still Golden Wild Zlimes in the area.

(Were they ones that escaped? No, but what if...)

What appeared in my mind all of a sudden was a small rumor that had been floating around about this place, the Deus Plains.

If that rumor were actually true...

Once again, I checked my watch.

3:12pm.

There wasn't much time left, but the destination was close by. It would still be possible for us to make it.

"Ringo, there might still be a chance to do something about this. We're heading southwest!"

Shouting out, I started running without even checking for her reply.

At least, I didn't have to worry about getting lost.

Our next destination, in the southwest part of the Deus Plains, was the biggest boulder in this area.

Even very early on, there had been plenty of reports regarding Extermination Fests in the Deus Plains where "all of the monsters should've been defeated, but for some reason the Fest didn't end."

But, since reports like that about Extermination Fests were super common and there were countless players who were saying similar things about places other than the Deus Plains, they were always met with casual responses like "I bet you just missed some. Search harder."

However, after Nekomimineko had been out for a while and parties fully equipped with detection items and skills were seeing the same phenomenon, there started to be suspicions that this might have been the result of some kind of bug in the Deus Plains.

What started trending at that time was a rumor about "Monsters Hiding in the Giant

Boulder".

According to the rumor, if you went to the back of the giant boulder in the southwest during an Extermination Fest, that is, if you stood on the south side of it, every once in a while a strange sound could be heard coming from the boulder.

It was discovered that this sound happened every five minutes, but even after monsters stopped spawning 45 minutes later, the sound continued.

From that, it suddenly became plausible that there might have been some kind of event monster in the giant boulder that needed some kind of condition to be released, and that this was preventing the Extermination Fest from being cleared.

However, even within the uproar about this hidden event monster, there was someone who had been focusing their attention on the peculiarities of the landscape in the Deus Plains.

Generally, there were things like bushes or boulders a set distance apart from each other throughout the entire plains, but there was an area without any of that a short distance away from the giant boulder in the southwest.

While covered in grass like everywhere else, for some reason, not only were there no spawn points, but there were also no other plants or even small boulders lying around.

And, curiously, the size of that empty area just happened to be about the same as the area of the large boulder. After realizing this fact, that person hypothesized that perhaps the giant boulder had originally been sitting in that empty area, before it was moved to its current location for whatever reason.

If that were the case, then the strange occurrence during the Extermination Fests could no longer be attributed to pure imagination.

It had already been determined that, if an obstacle were placed on a spawn point, monsters would spawn slightly to the side, but if the size of the obstacle were too huge then the spawn of the monsters would actually be cancelled.

What this meant was that, due to the giant boulder being moved to the place which used to be just normal plains, a spawn point ended up being inside the boulder, making it so that there was a single spawn point in the Deus Plains where it was impossible for monsters to spawn from, or so the conjecture went.

This indeed sounded quite convincing, but if that were the case, there was no way to prove it.

After all, it was impossible to perturb landscapes like the ground or boulders in the game. They were indestructible objects, or rather, they didn't have a destructible setting attached to them. The rumor eventually faded away, and I had completely forgotten about it until just now.

But, in this world which was a mix of game and reality, it was possible to verify this.

“Ringo, right here! Blast away at this with your full power!”

We circled around to the back of the boulder at top speed and found the place that seemed to be the location in the rumors. All that was left was to open up a hole.

“...Mm.”

Seeming to be speaking a bit more than when I first met her, Ringo shot off a lightning strike together with a quick reply.

The lightning strike, strengthened with the Golden Wild Zlime's rare drop, Golden Sakura, visibly carved away at the boulder.

“Keep it up, keep going just like that! Try to focus on the bottom, and if you can, try to keep the boulder from collapsing.”

While giving out instructions, I looked at my watch.

It was 3:14. It was going to be 3:15 soon.

As the lightning strikes dug into the boulder and my ears filled with thundering noises, I firmly waited for the time.

“Ringo, stop there!”

Finally, 3:15:00.

Inside the billowing cloud of dust, particles of light gathered.

“It spawned!”

Inside the giant boulder that had been gouged out, a single golden Zlime appeared.

“Dammit, this is so frustrating...!”

It had been a while since, and though we had been worked up over finding a new hunting ground, impatience and vexation started to settle in as time passed.

Right now, we had the sole monopoly of this spawn point.

But, since not a single monster had come out of this point until now, they would continue to spawn here another nine times, for another 45 minutes.

During that time, if this place were to get sniffed out by someone, then that was sure to become trouble.

That said, I had no intention of letting this point go after we put in all that work finding it. Of course, we had handily disposed of the first Golden that had spawned, extending our score to a total of 67. If we could just camp it out here, we could probably extend it to 76 without much effort.

I’m sure there are people who would say that a mere 10 extra kills wouldn’t be anywhere near enough to be able to compete against Hisame. Definitely, if Hisame had seriously hunted until the very end, 76 might not be enough.

But at that time, Hisame had said, “I will be finishing up very soon.”

If Hisame, in her overconfidence, stopped hunting partway through, then there was still a chance.

As proof of that, there was still this unexhausted spawn point in the south. Even if I couldn’t get all of them, I wanted to stick around for at least another three more, until I reached 70.

Riding on those hopes, time slowly ticked forwards.

I was now regretting that it would’ve been even easier to defeat them had I retrieved those Kuul Skulls I used for traps, but having gotten used to hunting Goldens, there was no way we would fail to bring one down. After cleaning up the second one in less than 30 seconds, it was yet another five minutes of waiting.

There were probably no other active points left, so there was no reason to go anywhere else.

We could only wait here.

“...Hm?”

I couldn’t contain my irritation, but then I felt a small hand clasp my shoulder.

It was Ringo.

“Is something wrong?”

I tried asking, but Ringo didn’t reply.

For long enough that I was just about to become bewildered, Ringo silently placed her hand on my shoulder.

“...Keep it, up?”

Absentmindedly saying just that, she quickly left my side.

I didn’t really understand what was going on, but perhaps she had been trying to cheer me up.

(...That’s right.)

Being this agitated wouldn’t help with anything. Rather than that, I should try to use this time more effectively.

“Alright!”

During this waiting time, I decided to try out the fire magic that I’d recently gained the ability to use.

Compared to skills, magic in Nekomimineko was a bit more complicated.

Unlike skills which can be used immediately by ordering the skill name, there was a whole system to using magic involving things like “chanting”, “casting”, “multiple chanting”, “delayed activation”, etc.

I needed to properly confirm whether these still behaved the same as in game.

“Powerup!”

In order to use magic, you first order the magic you want to use.

Doing so puts the player into a “chanting” state for a fixed amount of time based on the difficulty of the magic being used.

Even though it’s called the chanting state, there isn’t any particular need for the player to chant anything during this time. Their MP will be automatically consumed and the system will complete the magic on its own.

That makes it quite straightforward, but in the chanting state, many of the player’s parameters drop significantly and they are unable to use skills. This drawback was huge, so it was normal for magician type characters to equip themselves so as to reduce the effects or duration of this state.

Then, after the fixed amount of time for chanting ends, you enter into a “casting” state.

In this state, the player’s parameters don’t drop, but they’re still unable to use skills.

Only by targeting the destination and ordering the spell name once again while in the casting state does the magic finally get cast.

This was a good chance for me to test out the fighter type’s bread and butter, “delayed activation” magic.

“Delayed activation” is a technique to activate magic after a predetermined amount of time, such as thirty seconds later or two minutes later. The advantage of this technique is that, right after the delay is set, the player leaves the “casting” state, so with the right timing it would be possible to activate skills and magic at the same time.

It has flaws in that it isn’t possible to cancel or change the target of the delayed magic, so if the timing were off, the spell could become meaningless, or, in the worst case, even end up harming your allies. However, for self-targeted spells like Powerup, that was more or less irrelevant.

I cast Powerup with a ten second delay.

Then, right before the time came,

“Sideswipe!”

I activated a skill with Shiranui.

The skill activated without any problems, but...

“Ugh!”

I felt a blunt impact as my attack bounced off the boulder.

But, just then the ten second delay ended.

The spell Powerup had activated.

“Sideswipe!”

Without a moment's gap, I activated the skill again.

This time was unlike the previous time, before the magic had been applied.

A stronger blow struck the boulder...

“Ugh!”

And, of course, bounced off it.

The amount of attack power gained from Powerup wasn't nearly enough to damage the boulder. Just how strong were Ringo's lightning strikes to be able to carve away at this so easily.

I felt my shoulders dropping in disappointment, but as a result, my impatience seemed to have disappeared somewhere.

W-Well, the delayed activation worked just fine, so I should have been satisfied with this. Afterwards, I also tried out Petiteplosion, and it also activated without problems.

The dingy explosion from Petiteplosion drew Ringo's interest.

“...Fireworks?”

She seemed to have enjoyed it, and I got caught up in the moment and started throwing it around until my MP ran out and the experiments with magic had to be halted.

We spent our time like that, forgetting to even worry about the chance of someone showing up, and smoothly continued our hunting.

Until...

“Sextuple Stab!”

It was when we had quickly finishing off the eighth Zlime like normal and I was leaning over to check for its drops.

“Ohh. Amazing. I didn’t expect there to actually be Zlimes left here.”

From behind, a male voice rang out.

“Who’s there?”

I quickly sprung around.

Behind us, about ten meters away, stood a single man.

Seeing him, I gulped.

“Tea Drinker Ryden, huh.”

I unintentionally muttered that, and that man, Ryden, smiled joyfully.

“Hoo, you know who I am? Though I don’t remember getting a nickname like Tea Drinker, it feels great to have someone I’ve never met know my name.”

Tea Drinker Ryden was a man in his twenties, with long hair tied behind him and an aura that could be described as that of some kind of prop or maybe a streetlight in bright daylight.

His personal motto, or rather his primary modus operandi was “I will go meet people stronger than me”, and as a result of putting that into practice, he had become a character well loved by Nekomimineko players.

The Tea Drinker nickname also came from that, as apparently a beloved character from an old manga had a name that meant such.

However, that was all just talking about the game.

There were no events that involved meeting Ryden at an Extermination Fest.

While Ryden looked quite lax, he was a level 130 experienced adventurer. Even having raised our level somewhat, he was still someone who we would rather not face as an enemy.

(...What do we do?)

Our current count, even with the Golden Sakura not counting for anything, was 74.

If we backed off here, it's possible that we already had enough points.

However, feeling the tension in the air, Ryden hurriedly spoke.

“Whoa whoa. No need to stare daggers at me. I'm just here to pass on a message from the Princess.”

“...Princess?”

For a moment, I glanced over at Ringo. However, there was no way that were the case.

So could it be, from Maki?

I held that hope for an instant, but...

“Ah, I guess you don't use that name. I'm talking about Hisame. You know, she has those huge ears, and uses a sword...”

Completely off the mark. It would seem that that cat-eared samurai was being called a princess even though she was a samurai.

“So what happened was I couldn’t find any more Zlimes, and so I went back to the city. But then the Princess came and said that there might still be some Zlimes left, and told me this location. And when I said I was going to check it out cause it sounded interesting, she told me to pass on a message.”

“A message?”

“I’ll be waiting in the city’, she says.”

It was quite simple, and something that I’d already heard.

As I puzzled over this inexplicable message, Ryden showed a boorish smile.

“You know, the message was probably just an excuse, and the Princess might unexpectedly be worrying about you two. She even went on to say that if there were any fallen adventurers here, to bring them to her no matter what.”

I found myself speechless at Ryden, as he then followed up with “Whoops, she told me not to say that part” with a big fake smile. It looked like he really wasn’t planning to be our enemy.

At least, if I were to believe his background according to the game, he wasn’t the type of character to go for sneak attacks or any kind of foul play. I lowered my guard just a little.

“But man, you seem to be doing quite well for yourselves. How many have you killed?”

Perhaps he acutely saw my attitude slackening, as he came in with a sharp question.

As I was wondering whether to answer,

“By the way, I’ve killed 21!”

I relaxed on hearing his words...

“...Around, ninety or so.”

In the end, I answered like that.

Though it felt a bit like I was lying, since I said “around” it wasn’t technically wrong.

“Ohh! That’s amazing! I don’t even come anywhere close!”

Ryden had expressed his surprise in a dramatic fashion, but I didn’t miss seeing that piercing shine in his eyes the moment I said that number. It seemed that he’s not just what he seems. This was why you could never let your guard down in Nekomimineko.

“Even though the two of you look like newbies... Well, I guess my power, ‘Horse Hit’, is as strong as always.”

“.....!”

Hearing a nostalgic term, I almost did a spit take. However, not paying that any mind, Ryden cheerfully continued.

“Ah, I guess I haven’t told you yet. You see, my eyes can tell if something is strong, and I have the luck to always run into strong opponents. I first realized this when watching horse races. Since I could find the strong horses, this power was named ‘Horse Hit’, and it’s taken good care of me since then.”

Ryden spoke proudly, but this power, ‘Horse Hit’, was called a different name by the players.

Whether in the story or in sub-events, Ryden appeared again and again, encountered enemies stronger than himself over and over, and repeatedly engaged in battle with them.

Just hearing that, he sounded quite like a protagonist, but the problem with Ryden was that he would always *lose* those fights.

With that, the power to meet strong opponents, ‘Horse Hit’, takes on a different meaning.

The power to meet strong opponents and have a good fight with them, drawing out all of their abilities, then lose.

–In other words, the power to cause a spoiler effect.

Ryden was Nekomimineko’s one and only spoiler!

“So, what’re you going to do now? The mass spawning time is almost up, are you still planning to stay here?”

Nekomimineko’s spoiler, Ryden, asked me.

Even after the mass spawning ended, the monsters that were part of the mass spawning wouldn’t disappear and they’d still count towards the events, but if you didn’t report to the guild within one hour after the end of the mass spawning, you couldn’t receive any of the rewards for the Fest.

“The next one will be the last one. Once we defeat it, we’ll call it a day.”

The next spawn was at 3:55. If we stayed until the very last second, it was possible that we could have defeated even the following Golden, but once the clock hit 4 the mass spawning would be over, and normal monsters would start appearing in this field.

While we shouldn’t have had any problems with level 50 monsters as we were now, I didn’t want to take on any unnecessary risk. I’d already spoken to Ringo about heading back without waiting for the final spawn.

What worried me was what Ryden was going to do, but...

“Hmm. Well, I might as well stay and watch. If you want, you can count on me for protection on the way back.”

Whether he wanted to scout out his enemies, or if he were just a caring person, he gave that suggestion.

Honestly, I didn’t really like the idea of showing our hand, but since it was the last one anyways, we could just finish it off with Ringo’s lightning rush.

I accepted his offer, and we waited for the next monster spawn together with Ryden.

However, I really should have used my brain better. To consider just why Ryden had shown up at this timing, at this location...

“...Souma.”

The one who first noticed the signs was Ringo.

It must have been time. Particles of light gathered, forming the shape of a monster, but for some reason, its shape seemed strange.

“Oi oi. This is a rather big Zlime...”

Ryden made a carefree comment, but I wasn’t in a state to listen to it.

(No... way...)

The field, Deus Plains.

A spawn point forgotten by the game, hidden in a boulder.

And, the existence of the man beside me, Ryden, whose presence was said to always be accompanied by strong enemies.

From those three points, I had reached a certain hypothesis.

The particles arranged themselves into the form of a certain monster.

That shape was the ultimate proof that my dreadful hypothesis was correct.

“It’s still the mass spawning, right? Why is such a huge monster showing up?”

Ryden looked to me for confirmation, but I couldn’t give him a reply.

My body wouldn’t stop shaking.

Even if I tried to speak, my clattering teeth wouldn’t let me, and my jumbled thoughts couldn’t form words.

“...Souma.”

Somehow, Ringo had come beside me.

But I couldn’t respond, even to her.

I just stared as the particles of light formed a giant body, as the worst monster appeared.

(It's, coming...!)

What appeared, towering over three meters tall, was a grotesque giant.

-An armor of soft and flabby white meat covering its unimaginably large body.

-A ferocious and repulsive smile on the face buried within the meat.

-A giant kitchen knife that was so big it could only be called a blunt weapon instead of a blade.

There was, no doubt about it.

“King... Butcher!”

In the past, having killed the greatest number of players out of the many bugs in Nekomimineko, and having supposedly been fixed immediately with the first patch, was the bug, The Great Mincemeat Festival.

-It was now trying to reawaken its horror in this new world.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki >>> Nekomimineko Glossary

Poison-tan (Character)

The famous poison-tongued girl in the capital, and while a young girl, she is a full-fledged ドS. She's a famous character that any half-serious player would know of, yet nobody knows her real name. While some have had their hearts broken by her, there were apparently some perverts... I mean passionate fans, who would go every day to be stepped on so as to never forget her insults.

Ryden (Character)

A Warrior active around the Capital. An attention whore, holding the plain spot of number 1 in the amount of events participated in. His job is to challenge strong enemies and lose, teaching the player the enemy's strengths. Once in a blue moon, he will sometimes win, but at those times please admonish him with "What are you doing Ryden! Do your job!".

King Butcher (Monster)

The boss monster of the dungeon Giants' Cave which contains monsters averaging around level 165, and everyone's trauma machine. While it has been fixed with a patch, the Great Mincemeat Festival bug, where a mistake in the monster spawn table settings caused a large number of Butchers to appear in the Deus Plains, had been extremely famous. On the other hand, it has also been called a Meat Carnival by those who exploited the bug to mass hunt Butchers.

Tieru Lentia (Character)

A precious Healer that joins your party in the early game, but her low level makes it hard to expect much from her past the midgame. However, she possesses a unique trait, "double the effects of any equipment designed in bad taste", so depending on how you raise her she could take off. It's a thorny path, but as long as there's love, it may be fun to try to raise her.

Chapter 6

Despair

— 1 —

-The Great Mincemeat Festival.

It was a bug that couldn't even be called a bug, one that came from a simple, tiny, man-made mistake.

It was a great tragedy, caused by the most minuscule of mistakes: mistyping just two digits.

Even now, just hearing anything related to the event brings flashbacks of that time. On my very first playthrough, before the patch had been released, I had a personal encounter with the Great Mincemeat Festival.

When we arrived at the capital for the first time, our party was right around level 55.

While it was only possible to get to around level 50 in Ramlich, since we came to the capital not by Skyboat but via carriage, we had gained a few levels in that time.

Having heard from people on the streets that the Deus Plains had the weakest monsters in the area, I chose it as our first destination upon arriving at the capital.

At the time, our party was composed of an attacker, me; an attacker/tanker, Eddie; and a healer, Tieru; just the three of us.

Due to not having a magician, it would be tough facing multiple enemies at the same time, but luckily the Deus Plains was very open so there was little risk of enemies linking up. It was quite nerve-wracking fighting in a new place for the first time, but our levels were more than sufficient and we were able to defeat the two Wild Zlimes that appeared without much issue. It was when we ventured deeper in, carried by the momentum of our victories, that we ran into it. A grotesque white giant, the King Butcher.

We were slightly taken aback by its appearance as it looked obviously like some kind of event monster, yet we hadn't heard anything about special monsters appearing in the Deus Plains back in the city.

Thinking that it might be some kind of rare monster, we tried approaching it, when...

“...Eh?”

First, it crushed the Fighter, Eddie, down to half his normal size.

Even after everything, Nekomimineko was still an all-ages game.

There was no blood or gore anywhere, and the deaths of monsters were all quite cartoonish.

Even when humans died, they just became particles of light. It was all quite clean.

But at that time, I felt goosebumps on my entire body.

All the grotesque monster had done was swing his abnormally thick knife at Eddie.

But the result was that Eddie's body, unable to withstand the pressure, was instantaneously compressed to half of its original height, then it turned to light and disappeared.

It didn't matter that it was a game, that wasn't something humans could kill.

All it took was that one moment, one strike, for me to comprehend that I could not defeat this monster.

I commanded the healer, Tieru, to escape, as I also ran away with all my might.

From its looks, it seemed like it would be slow and heavy. Since it had such high attack power, it should have been quite slow.

As if supporting that hypothesis, I felt the tremor of its footsteps slowly getting farther away. Just as I was about to heave a sigh in relief...

“Wh-at...!?”

Suddenly, there was a huge rumble, and I instinctively jumped to the side with a Highstep.

Not even an instant later, I saw a giant white body barrelling past me.

“Tieru!”

I called the name of my one other party member, but what I saw when I turned around was not her figure, but particles of light dissolving into the air along with her blue clothes.

“Damn it!”

I was the only one left, so I continued to run for my life.

But, looking at the results, that had been meaningless.

After miraculously dodging yet another of the giant’s charges and somehow managing to survive, I found my vision eclipsed by a shadow.

“...Ah.”

As I looked up, this time I was filled with complete despair.

There was a second white giant.

Behind me, the first giant was closing in.

There was no place left to run.

—The very last thing I saw was the grotesque giant, swinging its knife down with a cheer.

Thinking back on it, there was no way I had any chance of winning back then.

After all, that white giant, the King Butcher, was a boss monster at the very bottom of a level 160 dungeon three maps beyond the Deus Plains.

There was no situation in which we, barely past level 50, could have done anything.

However, just why did the boss of a level 160 dungeon appear in the level 50 Deus Plains?

That was believed to be the result of a mistake in the spawn point settings.

As has already been explained regarding the spawn point settings, the monsters that appeared from each spawn point was determined by a number denoting the monster group.

But the danger with these numbers is that just one wrong digit could cause completely different monsters than intended to spawn.

The Great Mincemeat Festival was indeed a quintessential example of this.

According to a source that claims to have inside information, one of the staff mixed up number 205, "Wild Zlimes x3", with number 502, "King Butcher x1", and registered the wrong one in the Deus Plains.

In other words, what this meant was that all of the spawn points in the Deus Plains where a group of three Wild Zlimes, level 48 weakling monsters, was supposed to spawn, instead had a chance for the level 160 super boss King Butcher to appear.

That sight of many King Butchers leisurely walking around a level 50 low-leveled field as if they were normal field monsters could only be called a nightmare.

Of course, Nekomimineko players raised hell over this.

Even among boss monsters around the same level, the King Butcher possessed especially high damage, and while their normal walking speed was slow, they had a charge attack that was exceptionally fast. Combined with their strong resistance to physical damage, a half-baked attack wouldn't even be able to make them flinch.

The king of the dungeon that had descended to the Plains had, waving around the chinese kitchen knife in his hand like a blunt weapon, reduced many players to lumps of meat.

-This was what became known as the King Butcher's Great Mincemeat Festival.

But, well, Nekomimineko players loved adversity.

People started competing for low-level kills, and in the end, the most trained players could run around killing them as they pleased, but that was just one small portion of the players.

In fact, until the patch was released, even I wasn't able to kill the Butcher on the Plains.

Since that day, King Butchers had become the symbol of fear inside me.

“Shit! No way...!”

The problem was that the King Butcher had once again appeared in front of me.

King Butchers appearing in the Plains was supposed to have been patched, and right now we were still in the middle of a mass spawning. I wanted to say that there was no way it should've appeared here, but I actually already had a guess as to why this King Butcher appeared.

It's true that King Butchers stopped appearing in the Deus Plains after the patch. The reason was probably that the patch fixed the numbers for the spawn points.

But, in the end, the fix was made by Nekomimineko staff. It was more than possible that the spawn point in the boulder, which wasn't actually spawning any monsters, didn't get the fix.

In fact, I'd bet they definitely didn't fix that one.

To begin with, the King Butcher was a boss monster. As long as the boss flag was set, it wouldn't get overridden by the mass spawnings.

-Taking everything into consideration, it wasn't impossible for a King Butcher to appear here.

That said, knowing any of this didn't make the situation any better. In fact, both Ringo and I had been overwhelmed by the ferocity of the King Butcher, and we couldn't even move.

However, in our midst, there stood one man looking up at the King Butcher's giant body, his cheeks distorted in joy. That was, of course, Ryden.

"Hoo. Things have gotten quite interesting around here."

Hearing Ryden say that with a confident look, my stun wore off.

I felt an emotion like anger rush through me towards the all-too-carefree Ryden.

"This isn't the time to stand and gawk! If we don't run away right now..."

I raised my voice as if to throw my words at him, but...

"Yeah. That's why you guys should hurry up and run."

Ryden quickly parried that, and in one clean motion, he readied his weapon and stepped forwards.

"What are you talking about! That thing is..."

"Strong, right? That much I could tell a long time ago."

I was astonished by his words.

It wasn't really reliable information, but I'd heard that Ryden had an ability that let him detect strong enemies.

There was no way he couldn't tell how strong the King Butcher was.

But even then...

"You know, adventurers are giant idiots that charge straight towards things like monsters and ruins, and I'm no exception. I get super excited when I see someone strong."

Even then, he, the adventurer Ryden, stood in front of the King Butcher.

"But even those idiots, or maybe it's because they're idiots, have things that they need to take a stand for... Using this power to protect those who are weaker, that is my, no, that is the adventurer's way."

The scene was quite literally one of David and Goliath.

The giant had completely finished spawning, but standing front of it, Ryden didn't back down a single step.

He stared back at the white giant, who, having designated Ryden in front of its eyes to be its very first prey, let out a roar that seemed to reverberate deep in one's soul.

And then...



“You guys just watch me from there! This is the spirit of an adven-gueh!”

“...Ah.”

Seeing the beautiful arc that Ryden traced out in the sky after eating the Butcher's attack, I...

(That's right, other than Tea Drinker and Spoiler, he also had a bunch of other nicknames like Yamcha and Pop Fly and Home Run, was this what they meant...?)

I ended up remembering more irrelevant stuff.

Seeing Ryden fly off into the distance was just like a scene in the game, but this world was no longer the game world. In this world, NPCs were actual living people, and without the ability to reset or load, there was no way to undo a person's death. And even if the person taking the hit were *that Ryden*, if his HP fell to 0, he would die.

I quickly came back to my senses, and moving with High Step, I went and caught Ryden before he hit the ground.

Due to the world being game-like, there wasn't as much of an impact as I expected when I caught him.

All the while, I never took my gaze off the Butcher, but it didn't look like it was following me. It held its pose with the giant knife at the end of its swing, looking over the three of us as if assessing trapped prey.

“Are you alright!?”

I called out, and while wincing, Ryden quickly righted his body and crushed some healing medicine he took out from his pocket.

After a short delay, a healing effect appeared, signifying that Ryden's wounds had been healed.

Seeing that, I let out the breath I had been holding.

Ryden was level 130, and the King Butcher was at least level 160. The level difference was such that it wouldn't be unthinkable for him to have been killed in one hit, but Ryden's defensive abilities were abnormally high, allowing him to keep himself alive even after fighting a myriad of strong enemies.

In addition to his already high defense, it had also been confirmed that Ryden's defense increased as his HP went down, which some say was because he possessed some kind of special skill.

However, even though his defense was high, it didn't mean that he was invincible.

In the game, when he died, he died surprisingly easily. In fact, without progressing

through the events very carefully, it's more likely that he wouldn't be able to survive until the game was cleared.

Now that this place was like reality, this was definitely not a situation one could be optimistic about.

(...Is he going to attack?)

As if it had been waiting for us to ready ourselves, the Butcher's gaze narrowed.

Even after we unintentionally gained some distance due to the frightening knockback, that made no difference before the Butcher's giant body.

The King Butcher was a giant towering over three meters tall.

With just a single step, the gap between us visibly shrunk.

“...I’m sorry.”

Pulling himself away from my support, Ryden, while glaring at the Butcher just like I was, quietly muttered.

I thought he was apologizing for having to be saved after his recklessness, but I was wrong.

“Wha!”

Utilizing the moment I had my full concentration on the Butcher, Ryden forcefully flung my body backwards.

Then, using that momentum, he once again charged towards the Butcher.

“Run away! Head to the city, and call the Princess here!”

Yelling that, Ryden ran by the King Butcher as if trying to lure it in the opposite direction of the city.

At that moment, I finally understood Ryden’s apology.

There was no doubt that he was apologizing for being unable to defeat the Butcher.

So instead, he would use himself as a decoy to allow us to escape from the King Butcher.

(But that's just plain crazy!)

It wasn't just the difference in levels.

Boss monsters were made so that normally, they weren't something that could be defeated in a one-on-one.

The reason that I'd been able to make it through playing solo when it was still a game was by exploiting the various holes in Nekimimineko's system, together with the overpowered ability to restart when I died in order to challenge the game over and over again.

Ryden was an endurance-based warrior class. He excelled in physical battles where he could make use of his high defense, but...

"There's no use! Physical attacks don't work against that!"

A King Butcher was the worst possible match for him.

Setting-wise, the King Butcher's blubbery body absorbed impacts, cutting physical damage by 90%.

That probably also meant that our party's main DPS, Ringo's lightning strike, wouldn't work on it.

Right now, the only one who could use elemental attacks was me.

(I have no choice but to try...!)

I focused my sight on the Butcher's grotesque face. The experience of having been slaughtered in the game made my body tremble, but I curbed that with pure willpower.

(Petiteplosion!)

As soon as I could, I started to chant.

'I didn't think that I'd be needing to use magic so soon, so I'm glad that I had practiced

earlier', was not exactly what I was thinking.

While it was great that I was able to confirm that magic could be used the same way as in the game, I had gone overboard and used too much magic, so my MP had only barely recovered enough to be able to use a single spell.

Even then, it's possible that I could somehow overcome the situation by using this.

“Ryden! I'll...!”

Yelling out, I took a step forward...

“Idiot! Don't come!”

As if his inconspicuousness before the Butcher appeared was all a lie, Ryden's commanding voice stopped me in my tracks.

But a single glance at their exchange was enough to tell that Ryden needed assistance.

He had barely managed to receive the Butcher's attack with his shield, not giving up another clean hit like before, but the Butcher's attack was so fierce that it'd be a miracle if his defense could hold up for another few hits.

It was only a matter of time before his defense would be broken through.

“You can't beat him by yourself! But, if it's the three of us...”

I yelled out again, trying to move towards him, but...

“Even if you're fine with that, what about your partner?!”

Hearing Ryden's words, I paused my steps.

At the same time, my hot head quickly cooled down.

(Ringo...!)

Even with the situation being what it was, I still turned around to look at the blue-haired girl who was following behind me.

I thought about what would happen if the King Butcher were to attack this girl, who was looking at me with anxious eyes.

No matter how high her stats were, the Butcher was a boss monster over level 160. There was no way her current self could withstand an attack with a more than 50-level gap, and from a boss to boot.

(Say, if we were to just fight like this...)

Could we win? The obvious question floated in my mind.

I'd never challenged the Butcher at this level with these equips.

It was a complete unknown how much damage we would even do to it.

In the event we failed to take it down...

(I'd die. And then, Ringo would...)

If I let my emotions take over, I could forget about the fear of death for a moment.

But...

(Can I really drag her into my decisions?)

This was a predicament brought about due to my misjudgments.

If I died, I brought it upon myself. While I felt bad about getting Ryden involved, having chosen to step on the dangerous path of being an adventurer, he should be resolved to face at least this much danger.

But what about Ringo?

She had lost her memories and place of belonging and ended up following me just out of the flow of things.

She probably hadn't given any thought to the fact that choosing to be an adventurer meant living side-by-side with the danger of death. Involving her in all of this, then asking her to go along with my selfish decisions that could bring us death, could I really do that?

Even without all of these reasons, there was no way I could let this quiet girl be killed in front of my eyes.

“U...gh!”

“Ryden!”

While those thoughts flashed through my mind, Ryden was slowly being forced into a corner.

The most precious resource in this situation, time, was being wasted due solely to my indecision.

Finally...

“Hurry up and get out of here!!”

After Ryden repelled the Butcher with his shield and cried out,

“...I’m sorry!”

I made my decision.

After wringing out a word of apology, my hesitation disappeared.

“We’re escaping!”

Ringo looked up at me with a perplexed expression as I grabbed her hand and pulled her forcibly in the direction of the city. Frustratingly, I couldn’t use the Rapid Cancel Dash.

I was pulling along Ringo, whose reactions were strangely dull, so I didn’t have the ability to do so.

“Don’t worry! That guy’s defense is top-class! There’s no way he’ll fall to someone like that!”

Ringo still seemed hesitant, so I spoke as if to persuade her.

“...That’s right! He’s even fought a dragon in an event before. He didn’t die there, so

there's no way he would be kil... defeated by that ball of meat!"

I didn't know who I was trying to persuade anymore.

Still, I felt that if I stopped talking then something would come to an end, so I desperately continued to speak.

"I bet you don't know this, but in the game, he challenged that Hisame to a duel and lived through it! That Hisame, you know? Someone, someone like that, can't, possibly..."

At that moment, I heard the sound of a heavy, blunt impact echoing behind me as if two heavy objects had collided.

That's why I turned around.

I ended up turning around.

"Ry...den...!"

Ryden was lying on the ground.

The giant shield he was supposed to be holding had split in half, strewn on the ground around him, while he himself was lying face up on the ground, moving not a muscle.

"How could this be..."

All said and done, Ryden was supposed to be a reliable front-liner.

He appeared in many events, and even though he sometimes self-destructed by challenging strong enemies, he was a veteran adventurer that helped the player over and over again, and his tenacity, especially during defensive battles, was top notch...

"There's, no way..."

I thought I understood it.

I thought I was the only one who understood that this world was a game.

All games possessed a cruel backside, where things like people's wills or arduously

obtained skills are easily overruled just by changing a few parameters.

Especially this world of New Communicate Online. I thought I had understood that this was a world where people could be killed just on a whim.

I thought I understood it, but I actually didn't understand it at all.

“He...”

The Butcher slowly approached the fallen and immobile Ryden.

Ryden hadn't disappeared yet. That meant he was still alive.

But even from far away, I knew full well what the Butcher was planning to do to him.

(Death? He's going to be killed?)

Blood rushed through my head. My vision blurred for no reason, and his silhouette grew faint.

The nauseous feeling in my chest grew to its limit, and I felt the verge to vomit.

“Ringo. ...Run to the city, and don't turn back.”

I shoved Ringo's body towards the city just like Ryden had done to me, and once again moved my two feet that had at some point stopped.

...In the opposite direction they had been moving in.

I moved my feet as fast as I could towards the battlefield where the lying Ryden and that King Butcher awaited.

“AaaaAaaaaAAAAaaAhhHHH!!”

Trying to mask my fear, I shouted out.

But the Butcher paid no attention. At this rate, Ryden would be killed before I arrived.

That's why...

“Look, this wayyyyyy!!”

With a scream, I threw the Wakizashi in my right hand with all my might.

The Wakizashi flew in a straight line towards the Butcher, and while it missed the target, it managed to catch the Butcher’s attention.

Finally, the King Butcher turned in my direction.

But...

(It’s no use!)

I couldn’t completely grab its attention with just something on the level of the Wakizashi.

The Butcher’s gaze immediately returned to Ryden.

(As if I’ll let you!)

I *focused* on the Butcher’s ugly face, its weak point.

But the moment I was about to make my next move...

“-!?”

Vibrant lines of light stretched out, grazing by my body, and assaulted the white giant!

That happened not just once.

A second time, third time, over and over so many times that it’d be foolish to try to count, the attack continued to buffet the Butcher like surging waves, not giving it even a moment to breathe. Finally, the Butcher’s attention turned completely in this direction.

Not just its attention, but it completely turned its body towards me, no, towards the direction the mysterious attack came from, all the while covering its vital point, its face, with its hands.

There was only one person who could unleash an attack like that.

“Ringo!”

Before I noticed, Ringo was standing beside me, holding Golden Sakura at the ready.

“Why, why did you come back! If you come back, then who’ll contact Hisame...”

Restraining myself from feeling even for a moment that her presence was reassuring, I yelled out in anger.

In response, Ringo’s answer was plain and simple.

“...I’ll help. The enemy seems strong.”

While lightning strikes continuously surged out of the Golden Sakura in her right hand, she replied with a blank look.

It was so simple that I couldn’t even think of a retort.

“.....Hahaha.”

Her explanation was so clear-cut that I couldn’t help but laugh out loud even in this situation.

(This might be the first time I’ve fought side-by-side with someone like this.)

Turning towards the Butcher again, and while thinking of strategies to fight against it, such a thought suddenly surfaced in my mind.

When I had just started playing Nekomimineko, I had fought in a party, but in the end, they were just AI. Generally, they just moved following my instructions. It wasn’t quite something that could be called fighting together.

After I came to this world and met Train Girl, she did indeed help fight of her own will, but unfortunately, she didn’t have the skill needed to seriously help me out.

However, now, the girl shooting out lightning strikes beside me had come back to the front line of her own will for my sake, and although temporarily, was repressing the Butcher.

(Is this what it feels like to have a true ally?)

So I thought.

At the same time, I made up my mind about involving Ringo.

“Alright. Let’s fight together.”

Surprisingly, those words readily came out of my mouth.

Not protecting her or letting her escape, but fighting together with her and defeating that boss. That was, honestly, the only way I could think to repay Ringo for coming back to my side.

In that case, all that was left was whether I, whether we, could defeat that Butcher. Just that.

If we came out victorious, nobody would die.

Ryden, Ringo, and of course, my life would be saved.

And it wasn’t yet impossible for us to defeat it.

The moment I resolved to fight, I felt as if a veil had been completely lifted from my vision.

That moment was probably the very first time.

That I had looked straight at the King Butcher’s face.

I stared straight into those eyes whose will to battle hadn’t waned even a speck despite its movements being sealed and its body continually pummelled by Ringo’s lightning strikes...

“This time, we will defeat you!”

And I readied Shiranui with my two hands, prepared to take down my longtime enemy.

Perhaps it was because I'd discarded by hesitations.

Even though a fight was coming up in which I could die, I felt myself slowly calming down.

(First is to...)

Taking out all sorts of potions from my pouch, I threw them at Ryden's outstretched body beside the Butcher. I wasn't very confident in my throwing, but luckily most of the potions hit Ryden, scattering healing effects everywhere.

I used up all of the few recovery potions I had, but they were all just extras from when I went to The Cave of Trials with Train Girl, meaning they were merely potions from Ramlich.

It wouldn't be able to bring back his consciousness, or even recover any significant amount of HP, but at least he probably wouldn't die.

After dealing with one of the pressing problems, I turned my attention as composedly as I could towards the King Butcher, who was still being paralyzed by the lightning strikes.

(This... isn't going to last very long.)

In my first playthrough, my party had tried challenging the Butcher again after leveling up a bit.

At that time, we had adopted a strategy where the magician who had just joined us would stop its movements using a barrage of magic and create openings for us to attack. But, that strategy very quickly crumbled.

I vividly remembered what had happened.

That's why I wasn't harboring any naive hopes that we might have been able to push through just like this. While the lightning strikes were unexpectedly effective in completely stopping the Butcher from moving, it was clear that this was just a stopgap measure.

"Ringo. Unfortunately, normal attacks don't work on that thing. And since your lightning strikes don't gain elemental effects even when wielding an elemental weapon like the Heat Knife, you're not really going to be able to damage it."

While I didn't know if she'd understand the idea of elemental effects, I still straight-up explained the situation to Ringo. Surprisingly, Ringo showed a flash of comprehension, as she inquired about what to do with just her eyes.

"That's why I'll deal the finisher. It's probably going to start crouching very soon, and when that happens it's going to start ignoring your attacks. When that happens, move behind me so that I end up in a straight line between it and you."

When the opponent ran away or when it was taking damage for an extended period of time, the Butcher would unleash a charging attack.

And the moment it crouched down to prepare for that attack, it gained super armor, which meant that no matter what it was hit by, it would not flinch, be knocked back, or have its attack cancelled.

Then, the instant it was done preparing, it would start charging at us with a speed unimaginable for its heavy-looking body.

-But that moment is precisely our best chance for victory.

Since it wouldn't flinch or have its attack cancelled, that meant the timing for the attack was consistent and easy to read.

That's why I would wait right here for the Butcher's charge attack, then hit it with the tenth greatsword skill, Unbreakable Blade: Color Reversal, and defeat it.

(I can do this, right?)

I asked myself.

My main weapon, Shiranui, was a katana, but due to a mistake in its settings it's able to use greatsword skills. Many greatsword skills contained tremendous power, letting one defeat enemies stronger than oneself with a single strike if they hit, but as a trade-off they often came with strict conditions.

The tenth skill, Unbreakable Blade: Color Reversal, indeed fit that mould, as it was a

counter skill that was probably the top one or two in terms of offensive capability but came with great risks in its use.

As a counter skill, it naturally sent out a counter-attack if the user received an attack while the skill was activated, but this skill was not quite as straightforward as that.

The preparation time for this skill was extremely long. For the first two seconds of the skill before the guard frames became active, as well as either three seconds at the end if the counter activated or two seconds if it didn't, the player cannot move at all.

What's more, during the entire time, the player gains super armor, meaning an immunity to knockback.

In addition, since all of the player's input was ignored during that time, it was not possible to use any other skill or magic, and there was no way to cancel out of it.

While having super armor sounded cool, another way to look at it was "in return for being uninterruptible, become unable to distance yourself from the enemy no matter how strong an attack you receive."

Using this skill while being surrounded by strong enemies meant that while you might have been able to get off a counter, there was no doubt that you'd die right after.

Then, there was the next problem, that the window for activating the counter was extremely tight.

Even though there was a full two seconds of preparation, the counter could only be activated in the approximately 0.3 seconds that followed.

So, in order to use this skill effectively, one needed to detect the opponent's attack two seconds before it hit, then make sure to receive the attack between 2.0 seconds and 2.3 seconds in the future.

However, damage taken during the guard frames was not actually reduced in any way. Even if the counter would activate on taking fatal damage, it'd just end right there with the player dying.

This was a huge minus when fighting someone with a high attack like the King Butcher.

Finally, even if all of these conditions were met and the counter was activated, there

was no guarantee that it would be able to defeat the enemy.

The counter-attack that's activated was a *vertical swing* with *the same elemental attributes* as the attack the player received.

For example, if the player received a fire-element attack from a fire-element monster and activated the counter off that, the counter-attack would also be a fire-element attack.

It didn't matter whether that element would work on the opponent, and to begin with, the counter-attack wasn't an AOE attack or even an attack in the direction of the damage source, but a simple vertical slash in the direction the player was facing, so there was a definite possibility that the opponent could dodge the attack or that the player could send the attack in a mistaken direction.

This astonishingly troublesome skill was what one could expect from Nekomimineko. But, it also came with a power so strong that it'd make one want to try to use it even with all of the risks.

Furthermore, a vertical swing with the protracted reach of a greatsword could reach even the Butcher's vital point, its head. If there was any way to defeat the Butcher, there's no doubt this was it.

(So all that's left is to see whether I can hit the timing or not.)

It was the same, whether for my skill or the Butcher's charge, that once started, there was no more avoiding or cancelling.

Once the Butcher started its charge attack, it had no way to evade my counter-attack.

However, the Butcher's charge attack was extremely fast. In order to match my counter to it, I needed to be able to accurately time it to within 0.1 seconds.

0.1 seconds is a fleeting amount of time that passes before one can even finish thinking "now!" Under different conditions, even if one tried to do the exact same movements there would definitely be at least a 0.1 second difference somewhere.

Normally speaking, it was impossible to be able to accurately time something at that level.

(But I can do it. I know I can.)

I'd practiced chaining together skills one after another by hitting cancel points that last less than 0.1 seconds some tens of thousands of times.

Combining the delayed activation of magic with the use of skills, I'd designed complex and intricate combos, and executed on them.

My temporal management ability when I'm concentrating has been honed to where it could be one of my special skills.

-Even if nobody else could, this serious Nekomimineko addict who spent most of his university life gaming, Souma Sagara, should be able to do it.

That's why, just for this moment, I will forget that this world is real.

Right now, I'm seeing a virtual scene through that bulky and troublesome VR machine.

The only things that exist are me and the game data.

Everything I can see through my eyes is just blobs of data, and nothing unexpected exists.

Like so, I made myself believe.

My mind, which had calmed to beyond calm, measured the distance before me.

With my eyes, I calculated the time it would take the Butcher to reach me once it started its charge.

(Three seconds? Four seconds? Or is it even longer...?)

My past trauma, the gruesome scene burned into my mind of my teammates being knocked around by the charging Butcher, replayed itself.

Its speed, its distance to me, and its arrival time.

All those data points, I dredged up from my fragmented memories.

(...I've got it!)

4.1 seconds after the Butcher started, or more accurately, after I noticed the Butcher starting.

That was the answer I arrived at.

On this timing, I wagered my life; no, everyone's lives.

The moment I decided on a timing, as if it had been waiting for me to do so, the King Butcher started preparing its charge.

“Ringo!”

As I shouted out, Ringo was already moving behind me in cooperation.

Now, even if the Butcher had targeted Ringo, it would definitely run into me first.

With this, our preparations were complete.

(...Bring it on!)

The Butcher finished its preparation animation, signalling that it was about to start charging.

So as to not miss that instant, I concentrated on the Butcher, whose body had grown smaller, as if it were building up all its strength.

This concentration induced in me a sense of accelerated thought, stretching each second to infinity.

From outside, there was barely any change in the Butcher's appearance.

But I felt as if I had seen the power stored in its body start to burst out, like a compressed spring being released.

Finally, the moment came.

An explosion shot out of the Butcher's back! –So sudden was the acceleration that it made one imagine so.

But I didn't miss the timing. Immediately after seeing the Butcher's start, I began my

order.

(It takes two seconds to prepare the skill, so... now!)

Approximately two seconds later, I activated the trump card for our comeback, the skill Unbreakable Blade: Color Reversal.

Having done that, I'd done all that I could do.

All that was left was to pray that the counter properly activated and that the resulting counter-attack hit the Butcher.

Slowly, the skill's animation maneuvered my body.

The Butcher drew ever so much closer.

How's my timing?

Is it too early? Or is it too late?

...The answer came immediately.

(It's starting!)

Two seconds had already passed since I used the skill, but the Butcher still hadn't entered within the range of a greatsword.

The gap between us was uncomfortably wide.

Needless to say, it would be impossible for the Butcher to hit me within the next 0.3 seconds.

...But, that was fine.

Even without the Butcher's attack, the instant my brain recognized that the counter was prepared, my vision was covered with an explosion.

-It was the fire magic, Petiteplosion.

This was my trump card, the one that I had finished chanting before running away and

kept in stand-by mode for all this time.

The magical explosion, set for delayed activation 4.1 seconds ago, damages everything in the area, be it friend or foe.

In particular, the caster, myself, was no exception.

(Guh!)

The explosion assaulted my body, but there wasn't much force behind it.

With my low magic stat, my spell damage wasn't anything to brag about, and the base damage for Petiteplosion wasn't high anyways.

But on the other hand.

-My body, having received a fire elemental attack from Petiteplosion's blast, automatically activated a counter-attack!

This was the true ace up my sleeve.

If I were to counter-attack after being hit by the Butcher's charge, that definitely wouldn't work in time.

That's why I hit myself with my own attack, in order to activate the counter with the perfect timing.

It was a charade of a counter.

This was a gamer's fighting style, something that residents of a fantasy world couldn't possibly imagine!

My two hands holding Shiranui naturally raised themselves over my head.

At that instant, it seemed as if there were a long blade of flames extending out of the tip of the raised sword.

“Aarghhhhh!!”

I poured my whole self into this one strike.

Aiming at the white giant that entered the greatsword's range with the expected timing, I swung down the blade of flames.

As if being sucked towards its target, the attack hit the white giant directly on its head!

“Guahhhhhhh!!”

The monster let out an ear-splitting cry.

A heavy recoil passed through my hands, carrying the definite feel of something breaking.

(I did it!)

Even that giant couldn't withstand this one hit.

Having been hit directly in its vital point, the head, its giant body staggered, and dropping the knife from its hand, it fell to one knee...

(...Eh?)

And there, it caught itself.

“Grahhhhhhh!”

Once again, the giant roared out.

However, it wasn't one of pain, but a manifestation of pure fury.

The target that the giant stared at with its horribly crushed face was...

(...This is bad!)

The giant's animosity pierced my being.

While it had taken a huge amount of damage, the white giant, the King Butcher, had not lost its will to fight.

Re-gripping its fallen knife, it made a simple swing.

(Shit shit shit shit!)

I couldn't move due to the after-cast stun.

This stun couldn't be cancelled.

I had no way of avoiding this attack!

(Move! Move move move!)

My heart screamed at the body that wouldn't listen to its commands.

The stun continued.

I still couldn't move!

(Damn it! Flash Step! Highstep! Step! Jump!)

I tried using skill after skill, knowing full well that it was useless.

Of course, my body didn't react.

The knife that was like a blunt weapon approached, aiming for my eyes.

“Souma!”

A shrill storm of lightning strikes deflected the attack ever so slightly.

But it wasn't enough to stop the attack.

In slow motion, I saw the deflected strike heading for my body.

(Flash Step! Flash Step Flash Step Flash-)

But suddenly, it was the end.

“Guh!”

I stopped breathing.

An insuppressible impact hit my chest.

That one hit made my thoughts blank out.

Even then, my gaze was automatically drawn to the source of that impact.

It was an unreal scene.

A giant knife gouging itself into my armor, tearing through it effortlessly.

The gigantic weapon couldn't be stopped by something like that.

I was acutely aware that my end was near.

As if to prove that point, the lead colored weapon continued on its path, its power not diminishing the slightest, as it next looked to cleave my body in two-

(Ahh, so here's where I di-)

-The protracted duration I experienced cut off there.

“Guahhh!!”

Involuntarily, I let out a scream in anguish.

The world spun. Spun. Spun.

There was also a sound and an impact. I couldn't follow what was going on.

“A... gah...!”

I saw the sky, then the ground, then the sky again. I didn't know where I was.

The force of the impact assailed my whole body.

I could no longer feel Shiranui's presence in my two hands.

All I knew was that I was like a ragdoll in front of that attack, and before I realized it I was looking at a scene where the ground and the sky each took up half of my sight.

“U... a...”

A moan leaked out of my half-open lips.

Pain was everywhere.

The area around my chest felt like it was scorching.

I really didn't want to know what state my body was in.

But I was alive.

And from what I could see, it seemed that I was lying sideways on the ground.

I was barely able to figure out that right as I had resigned myself to death, the after-cast stun had ended and I had been blown away.

(I, lost...)

A sense of defeat flowed over me.

I gave it my all.

Using all of my knowledge and experience, I won that risky gamble and landed that one hit.

But even then...

I wasn't able to overcome the absolute wall of parameter differences.

Even the greatsword bonus and the skill bonuses weren't enough to bridge the gap in strength.

I had lost.

At the same time, I very clearly realized.

-I'm going to die.

Without having accomplished anything in this world, without even getting a chance to

return to my old world, I'm going to be killed on these plains by a monster, turn into particles of light, and disappear.

For some reason, I thought that might not be so bad.

My body couldn't even twitch anymore.

I couldn't tell if I was still feeling pain. My entire body burned and all my senses felt so distant.

Everything would probably become much more bearable if I just closed my eyes like this.

But, if I were to have just one regret...

“Souma!”

As she called out, I saw my last regret come running over.

Seeing that, I became at peace.

This is my final job, I told myself as I tried my hardest to move my mouth.

“Run, away...”

I wonder if she was able to hear me.

I didn't know. But strangely, I felt like my message had been conveyed to her.

“...”

There was no reply.

Instead, she responded to me with her actions.

In front of my eyes, she dropped a gold colored ninja knife.

Her weapon, Golden Sakura, landed right in front of my eyes.

(So this is it...)

This was her answer.

To give up her weapon.

This meant that she was prepared to run.

(I'm, glad...)

Somewhere in my heart, I felt a tinge of loneliness, but that was engulfed by an overwhelming sense of relief.

Now, I had no more regrets.

All that's left was to pray that Ringo could safely escape while the Butcher was busy turning me into a corpse.

That's what I had thought.

However...

(What is she doing?)



Seeing her, who had given up her weapon, reach for her waist, my eyes grew wide.

After all, that made no sense.

The only thing that was there was her one other weapon, the Heat Knife, which was quite a few ranks weaker than the Golden Sakura.

(Why...?)

She grabbed the Heat Knife in her hand, but there was no point to that.

Her lightning strikes were not modified by the weapon's element.

She definitely understood that.

“...Souma told me that it was okay for me to be here.”

But that wasn't it.

“...That's why, I'll be by your side, Souma.”

The one who didn't understand was me.

“...I'll always be by your side.”

I was the one who hadn't understood anything at all.

“–That's why, I'll protect you, Souma.”

I looked at Ringo, incredulous that such words would come out of her mouth.

Finally, when she ran towards the Butcher without any hesitation, gripping the knife in her hand, my foolish self understood everything.

–Close combat.

Ringo had remembered my words that her lightning strikes didn't gain the elemental effects of her weapon. But even if her lightning strikes didn't work, cutting the enemy with the Heat Knife directly would, of course, count as an elemental attack.

That's why she had given up her greatest strength, the lightning strikes, intending to clash with the Butcher with just that single paltry knife.

All in order to protect me.

To help someone like me.

But that was far, far beyond reckless. She had zero experience in close combat and all of her parameters were inferior to the King Butcher's.

That was no longer in the realm of being unreasonable or irrational.

It was simply a suicidal act.

(Don't bother...!)

I tried to stop her.

I tried to hold her back, to tell her to stop doing such stupid things.

Compelling my immobile body to move, I forcibly reached out my hand.

But all I grasped was air.

(Please, reach...!)

I stretched out my arm.

Trying to reach even further.

But my hand wouldn't move like I wanted it to.

“U, ah...”

I yelled out, asking her not to go.

But my voice wouldn't come out.

(Reach, please reach...)

She ran. There was no indecision in her steps.

Soon, she'd arrive before the giant.

If that happened, then she'd probably be killed, just like that.

That would be unacceptable.

That would be completely and utterly unacceptable!

(Reach! Reach, reach, reachhh!!)

I desperately raised my voice, trying to reach out my hand.

“A-AaaaaAAAAAAHHH...!”

My enfeebled body could no longer move, and my screams were now mute.

But–

(...I reached it!)

–My outstretched hand made contact with a golden handle.

(With this...!)

My powerless hand grabbed onto Golden Sakura.

That trembling hand was not so much gripping the knife, as it was only able to muster enough strength to barely wrap itself around the knife's handle.

However, that was enough.

As long as I was deemed to be holding the knife, that was sufficient.

I was no longer able to utter any words, or even make a sound.

But that was not a problem.

Even without anyone hearing it, those words were sufficient.

That's why, while holding on to Golden Sakura, I *yelled ordered* loudly in my mind.

-Bloody Stab.

Immediately, an unexplainable power surged through my dying body.

The hand that I couldn't move anymore jerked, nimbly delivering a rapid stab into the air.

However, there weren't any targets for the knife to stab into.

Thus, the stab cut through thin air, and the skill ended without hitting anything.

...Was what it seemed like.

But it had definitely caused a change.

The change was nowhere else but right inside of my body.

“Whoaaaaa!!”

My wounds started to heal.

Energy started to fill my body.

I felt just like I had at the start of the battle, or maybe even better than that.

Merely one second had passed since I activated the skill.

My foot, which shouldn't have been able to move anymore, once again planted itself on the ground.

“Ringo!!”

However, what I saw after getting up was Ringo being helplessly blown away after receiving a sweeping blow from the Butcher.

While running towards her landing spot, I could feel the blood draining from my face.

If she ate a full-force attack from the Butcher...

(...Wait!)

I saw a shattered Heat Knife in Ringo's hand while she was being blown away. It seemed that she narrowly blocked the Butcher's attack with the knife.

In the game, there was a system where the damage received from an attack could be reduced by blocking it with a weapon, even though it wasn't a shield.

I put my faith in Ringo being in one piece.

Connecting the short cancels of Step, Highstep, and Flash Step, I dashed towards her at maximum speed.

Catching up to the girl who was still flying through the air, I jumped up with a Jump...

“Shadow Snatch!”

...and activated a dark-elemental ninja sword skill, Shadow Snatch.

Pitch black claws caught Ringo in mid-air, slowing her momentum and at the same time curing her wounds.

Having lost its momentum, Ringo's body started falling, but unfortunately, I couldn't go catch her in my arms like the hero in a manga.

If I stopped my skill combo now, Ringo would fall to the ground and I wouldn't be able to move due to the after-cast stun.

“Guh, Flash Step!”

I was starting to hit the limits of my stamina, but I pushed myself and connected into a Flash Step.

But rather than catching her, due to the effects of Flash Step it ended up more like me pushing her along with my body as we gained some distance from the Butcher.

“Ugh!”

Entangled, the two of us crashed into the ground.

But as a result, the after-cast stun was cancelled and, while concerned about Ringo, who had ended up beneath me, I speedily uprooted myself.

“Are you alright?”

When I opened my mouth to check on her, Ringo reacted with fervor.

With swiftness that I'd never seen from her before, she turned towards me.

“Sou, ma?”

Looking up at me, Ringo's eyes were opened wide in disbelief.

From her reaction, it seemed likely that there weren't any problems with her body.

“Sorry for leaving everything to you. But it's alright now.”

It seemed I'd made her worry, so if possible, I wanted to explain everything to her, but there was no time for that. While we'd gained some distance, we were far from being in the safe area.

I deliberately pulled my gaze away from Ringo and quickly stood up.

“...Souma.”

Ringo's anxious voice rang out behind me, but I answered without turning around.

“It's okay, you can leave everything to me.”

The conditions were all there.

I had enough strength. My concentration was heightened, and I had a new weapon.

That's why.

“I'll defeat it.”

As if proving my determination, I took a step towards the Butcher.

After facing the King Butcher head-on, I was able to confirm my suspicions.

(...It's injured.)

When bosses in Nekomimineko took damage, there was a type that got weaker and a type that tried to kill the player by unleashing its hidden powers. Luckily, the Butcher was the former type.

Compared to the start of the battle, its movements were clearly lacking luster. My desperate counter had not been pointless.

That said, I didn't quite have an absolute advantage yet.

The bosses that got weaker as they're closer to death frequently had high regenerative abilities, and the Butcher was undoubtedly going to be of the same case.

I needed to bring the battle to a close in one breath while I still held this advantage.

(But, with this Golden Sakura...)

I could adopt a fighting style impossible with Shiranui and execute it with more power than the Wakizashi could offer.

Due to its nature, many of the ninja sword skills could not be used until in very close range to the enemy, but against the current Butcher with its movements dulled due to damage, it wasn't impossible to land a few hits.

(Not to mention...)

I had yet another ace up my sleeve.

I had the [Ring of Light I].

It was back when I visited the accessory shop in Ramlich with Train Girl.

There, I had bought one ring of each element, as well as a total of *eight* Ring of Light Is.

The Elemental Ring I series have an effect of reducing the power of the opposing element by 80%.

So, what happened when two of those rings were equipped?

In this game, elemental buffs/debuffs combined additively.

Which meant that two minus 80% became minus 160%.

Furthermore, an elemental attack's power was its base attack power times the multiplier.

Putting this all together...

What do you know, when you equipped two or more Ring of Light Is, your dark elemental attacks ended up healing what you hit.

Thus, how did I, on the verge of death, manage to recover in an instant?

Of course, the answer was in what I just explained.

Ninja sword skills were full of stealth and assassination type skills, and perhaps because of their dark image, many of those skills were dark-elemental.

To give an example, there was the dark-elemental multi-hit skill Shadow Snatch that I used moments ago.

There was also the bugged skill nicknamed “instant suicide” that also attacked the player due to a mistake in the skill’s target settings, Bloody Stab.

I’m sure you can already imagine what happened.

Bloody Stab was a dark-elemental skill, and it’s bugged to also attack the player when used. So when used while equipping two Ring of Light Is, amazingly, your HP would be healed by 60% of Bloody Stab’s attack power.

60% was nothing to look down on. Most physical attack-based characters weren’t able to derive an effect from using recovery magic.

In that sense, though it required using up both ring slots, being able to heal without using MP and at almost zero cost while scaling off physical power made Bloody Stab quite an excellent healing skill.

...Though, that was all when this was a game.

In this world, things were slightly different.

In the game, due to system restrictions, only two rings could be equipped, but in this world it became possible to wear ten rings.

And right now, seated on my fingers were all eight of the light-elemental rings I had bought.

The dark-elemental debuff was at $80\% \times 8 = 640\%$. Even subtracting the original 100% left 540%. The amount that Bloody Stab healed was more than five times its base attack power.

It’s no surprise that my HP would be completely healed in an instant.

Moreover, these two skills weren’t the only dark-elemental skills I had.

Facing us, the King Butcher stirred.

That was the signal for the start of the second battle between me and it.

“Step!”

That very moment, I used a skill and closed in on the Butcher.

I planned to make this quick.

The movements of the injured Butcher were undeniably duller compared to at the start of the battle.

I’d charge at it from the front and end this with one strike.

(It’s coming!)

As I hardened my resolve, what came to meet me was the Butcher’s knife.

Alerted by my approach, it swung the giant clump of metal.

“Highstep!”

However, I had no intention of playing along with it.

I cancelled Step into Highstep.

With speed surpassing the Butcher’s expectations, I drew up to its giant body.

Yet the Butcher was able to adapt to that.

The knife in its hand immediately swung down towards me.

It was on a collision course!

But...

(That’s still too slow!)

There, I kicked it up another notch!

“Flash Step!”

This was, currently, my fastest movement combo.

While the Butcher at the start of the battle might have been able to deal with it, the injured Butcher was completely unable to keep up with this speed!

Just like that, I dashed towards its chest.

A giant something grazed past behind me, but power didn’t matter if it didn’t hit.

(Right now!)

At the same time, the Butcher’s empty left hand flew towards me, trying to catch me.

But I had already...

“Jump!”

...cancelled Flash Step and activated Jump, and had already leapt high off the ground.

Losing its target, the Butcher’s left hand swept thin air.

Finally...

Launched into the sky, I came face to face with the Butcher, as it was still leaning forward due to the effects of its own attacks.

I was in extremely close proximity to the giant’s weakness and its vital point, its face!

(This, is the end!)

Staring straight at the Butcher’s face, warped by surprise, I activated the final skill!

It was, of course, a third dark-elemental ninja sword skill.

“–Assassin’s Rage!!”

The thirteenth ninja sword skill, Assassin's Rage.

As the thirteenth skill, this skill should've been a powerful skill, but for some reason, its damage had a negative multiplier attached to it and it became known as a landmine, since using it healed the opponent instead.

But, what if it's activated with a negative dark-element multiplier?

Negative times negative, and it becomes positive.

Now what if it was unimaginably negative, like -540%?

The answer was obvious. It turned this skill, mockingly called the Sword of Life, into the strongest sword of death, or rather, a sword of certain death, capable of defeating even giants!

“It's, overrrrrrrr!!”

The dark blade that I swung with a shout ate into the white giant.

Black and white, the two that couldn't coexist clashed fiercely, but the struggle was over in an instant.

The strike shrouded in darkness distorted the grotesque white face, then, finally...

“Gueahhhhhhh-!”

-It shattered.

“Guh!”

Due to the skill's effect, my body continued travelling forward after defeating the Butcher.

Bursting out of the giant's backside, I landed on the ground without being able to even brace myself.

(Is it over?)

This time, it should've definitely been defeated, but unlike in the game, there wasn't any fanfare or notices announcing the boss's defeat, nor the dying screams of the giant.

But as I stood up and hurriedly turned around, I saw the giant's body turning into particles of light bit by bit, dissolving into the air.

“It's over... right?”

Still unable to believe the sudden conclusion, I muttered to myself.

I looked again at the place where the white giant's body had been, but there were only its item drops left.

The King Butcher's signature greatsword and one of the reasons the Butcher had been hunted so much, the unique weapon Butcher's Knife, and a consumable item that raises the strength stat slightly, Power Seed.

That was all that was left at the place where the Butcher disappeared.

But there was no time for us to be spacing out.

“Wait! What's the time!”

I looked at my watch.

The watch, which had managed to avoid being broken in the previous exchanges, showed a time of 3:59.

“Ringo! That boulder!”

I threw her the Golden Sakura while giving instructions, and Ringo immediately shot out lightning strikes at the large boulder the Butcher came out of.

It seemed Ringo understood what I meant, as she skillfully collapsed the top part of the boulder, aiming to use the rubble, but...

“Hurry up! It’s gonna...”

Time passed ruthlessly.

As the second hand pointed straight up, and light started gathering towards the spawn point inside the boulder...

“...Made it.”

The light was dispersed by the large amount of rocks falling down from above.

We nervously waited for a while, but there were no signs of a monster trying to burst out from inside the boulder.

It appeared that everything really was over.

“Haaaaah...”

Heaving a deep sigh, I sunk to the floor.

This time, things had been seriously dangerous.

The dangers up until now were never really out of my control, or rather, they all seemed to have had some kind of comical twist to them, but this time things were truly dangerous.

I could only say that I was lucky to have been able to make it out of this.

Well, of course, it wasn’t completely due to luck.

“Thanks Ringo, you saved me.”

Seeing Ringo walk towards me with shaky steps, perhaps still recoiling from the hit she took from the Butcher, I expressed the feelings in my heart.

Like covering up the spawn point at the end, today had been full of things that I wouldn't have been able to do anything about without Ringo. This might have been the first time since coming to this world that I had been truly saved by someone else.

“.....Mm.”

However, it seemed like Ringo had returned to her normal self now that the danger had passed.

Whether she had heard my words or not, she moved her head up and down ever so slightly that it wouldn't have been possible to tell without concentrating.

Her face had also returned to her usual blank expression that made her seem mysterious while in reality was probably because she wasn't thinking about anything at all.

For some reason, that felt deeply moving, as I continued inspecting Ringo's face, but...

“...What's that?”

Hearing Ringo's words, my gaze moved towards my chest.

There, something white was peeking out from the gaps of the ruined mithril armor.

It was my collar bone, exposed by the Butcher's attack... no, of course not.

“Ah, ahhhh. I see. So that's why. Haha, ahahahahaha!!”

When I realized what it was, I was hit with an uncontrollable urge to laugh.

“...?”

Seeing me suddenly burst into laughter in front of her, Ringo tilted her head slightly, but I just couldn't stop my outburst.

This must be the result of all the tension dissipating.

Taking advantage of Ringo not saying anything, I rolled around laughing for a while.

(Ah, man, I can't believe it. This is why a game world is so interesting.)

Right after I had unleashed that fire counter.

While suffering from the after-cast stun, I had taken a direct hit from the butcher.

So how did I manage to survive, with my level and parameters all so much lower?

The answer was this.

(Who knew, you really can't underestimate petty tricks.)

What saved my life, this thin white object peeking out from under the mithril armor, was the insurance I had kept set in the armor ever since I first visited the armor store.

It was a quest item that had been upgraded from an important item to a Key Item since it was being lost so frequently, and had gained the property of being indestructible.

-It was what I received from Old Tuto: the Mysterious Scrap of Paper.

Chapter 7

Triumph

— 1 —

“I’d never thought the two of you’d be able to bring down that giant thing by yourselves.”

Ryden had gotten back up while we were fussing around with the piece of paper.

He appeared more lively than I expected him to be. It’s likely that he healed himself with his own potions.

“There’s a bunch of things I want to talk to you about, but it’s still dangerous here. Let’s hurry back to town.”

Normal monsters will start spawning again now that the mass spawning is over.

Following Ryden’s proposal, we quickly cleaned out the Butcher’s drops and returned to the capital.

Now then, about those drop items. First was the Butcher’s Knife, which Ringo and I had managed to stuff into my bag after much effort. It was the unique boss drop of a level 160 dungeon, after all. As a greatsword, its weapon type bonus was huge and its attack power was also exceptional, but it had just one problem.

Its weight, which was around 6 times that of a normal sword, 8 times that of my Shiranui, and a full 33 times that of Hisame’s Getsuei.

Even if comparing it to Getsuei isn’t really helpful, it was heavy enough that you might as well change its name to Clump of Metal.

This sword’s too heavy for anyone to properly wield. I don’t want to admit it, but it was completely a meme weapon. A meme about just how strong Mr. Butcher is.

I had mulled over whether I should use the other drop—the Power Seed—on the spot,

but in the end, I stowed it in my bag.

As its name suggests, the Power Seed is a mysterious seed that strengthens the consumer, giving them a permanent increase to your strength stat. Including the Butcher, any kind of unique boss would always drop some kind of seed. In this case, such items weren't particularly rare, but permanent stat increases always seem to have some kind of charm that attracts gamers, no matter what game.

However, the seed-type items only bestow a tiny stat increase. Apparently it's so tiny that back in the old version where Butchers ran all around the Plains, you would need to spend an entire day farming Butchers to notice any kind of an effect.

To be quite honest, it's a lot faster to gain stats from levelling up. I can't expect just a single seed to be of much use anyways, so I've chosen to use it to fatten up my bag for now.

The Extermination Fest results ceremony wasn't until an hour after the end of the mass spawning, so there was still quite a bit of time left. But I was actually slightly worried whether we could make it back to town in that time while dealing with monsters along the way.

And so, keeping open the possibility of asking Ryden to escort us back, we headed back together with him, but really, my worries were completely unwarranted.

“That young lady's just amazing...”

The monsters were wiped out by Ringo's lightning strikes before monsters could even get close.

I felt slightly hesitant to show our cards to Ryden, but he already knew that we defeated the Butcher and that we defeated close to ninety Goldens. Rapid-fire lightning strikes aside, it just looks like some kind of rare magic at most. In reality, we'd probably make him more suspicious if we tried to hide all of our cards.

I had handed Golden Sakura to Ringo, so I was using the Wakizashi I retrieved, but with my rings' 5x Assassin's Rage power, I should be able to defeat anything here without much of a problem, except for monsters with strong elemental resistances like Goldens or Hisame.

On the way, I tried to join the fight multiple times, but...

“...Souma, no. It’s dangerous.”

With Ringo’s stubborn insistence, I was forced to casually stroll back together with Ryden.

By the way, when we stopped by to retrieve the Kuul Skulls traps, Ryden gave us an impressed look.

“Huh. So you were the ones that set this up. I have no idea how it works, but it’s a good trap. It’s helped us out a bit too.”

Apparently, Ryden made use of some of our traps to hunt Goldens. While he could have easily remained silent about it, to confess to it guiltlessly was indeed very much like Ryden.

I strengthened my guard against Ryden a bit, but after that, our conversation turned to harmless chit-chat and introductions as we continued heading back.

However, as we approached the city, Ryden suddenly hardened his face.

“We risked our lives fighting the same enemy. That’s why I already think of you as comrades.”

“But, I...”

I couldn’t help but feel apprehensive since we were behind the Butcher’s appearance. Having attempted to escape the battle at one point also made my tongue feel heavier.

Yet, Ryden shook his head as if saying that none of that mattered and continued.

“I’ll say this since I don’t want to hide things unnecessarily from my comrades, but I actually saw a bit of your fight against the Butcher. Though only at the end, when you finished off that giant.”

“You saw...?”

Ryden solemnly nodded.

According to Ryden, he came to right around when Ringo had been blown away by the Butcher. He wasn’t able to move his body then, but he very clearly saw me charging at

the Butcher.

“When I found out that the princess had taken an interest in you, I thought that spring had finally arrived for the princess. Especially so after I actually met you and determined that you weren’t particularly strong. ...But, it seem I was wrong.”

Ryden moved his gaze at me.

In his eyes I saw a sharp glint much like when he was facing off against the Butcher.

“Well, I don’t know how strong or weak you actually are, but at least I’m sure that the princess isn’t interested in you solely because she’s head over heels over you. Those odd moves and that strange skill you used to defeat that beast, I’ve never seen any of them before. I feel like I’m starting to understand why the princess calls you a ‘Strange Sword User’.”

It seems like Hisame plans to spread the title of ‘Strange Sword User’ throughout the capital.

It’s quite an effective way for her to take revenge, in a sense.

I wanted to object to many of the points he brought up,, but for the moment I decided to forget about it. Instead, I gave Ryden a quick heads up.

“If possible, I don’t want my fighting style to be widely known...”

“I know, I know. Didn’t I just say you were my comrade? I won’t do anything to betray my comrades.”

“...Thanks.”

What can I say, these kinds of spoiler characters are almost always nice guys.

However, this nice guy had more to say.

“Still, if you’re really strong, people are going to notice your abilities before long. It probably won’t be too long before rumors of the Strange Sword User have spread throughout the country.”

“Please no.”

If this was really Hisame's way of getting back at me, I'd say she definitely succeeded.

The city gates appeared in sight as I wallowed in depression.

"We've finally made it back."

It hadn't even been two hours since we left, but I was feeling excessively nostalgic for some reason.

The three of us passed through the gate, catching up to Ringo, who had been walking a short distance in front.

"Well then, I'm going to meet up with my teammates at the plaza. What are you two going to do?"

The sounds of a clamorous city engulfed us the moment we passed through the gate. Ryden raised his voice slightly and I followed suit.

"We're going the same way until the plaza, but we're planning to report to the guild immediately, so we'll be parting there."

Normally, the results of a request had to be reported directly to the counter at the Bounty Hunters' Guild, but the Extermination Fest was an exception as it was a special event. Results were reported and also disclosed in the Central Plaza. In particular, the top three teams in terms of points were called up onto a special stage for the event and their "destroy", "collect", and total point counts were announced. The winner was also publicly disclosed there, in front of a large audience.

Of course, Ryden knew that as well. He replied as he glanced over at the giant stage visible even from where we stood.

"We'll probably see each other very soon. When the results are announced. The princess went a bit overboard, so the numbers for this Fest are quite skewed. It's almost certain the top three will be split between our three teams."

"Huh, is that so?"

That's great news if that's the case.

Ryden grinned, seeing the corner of my lips involuntarily curve upwards.

"You're a comrade, but I won't go easy on you in a competition. We'll be doing our best to win this."

"I'd like to say 'bring it on,' but isn't the mass spawning already over?"

What are they going to do their best on now that there aren't any enemies to defeat?

Hearing my reply, Ryden smiled wryly.

"That, might be the case. But, having the right spirit... oh, it seems that my teammates have arrived."

Ryden's speech was interrupted by an approaching male-female pair of capable-looking adventurers, looking right at us.

They must be Ryden's teammates.

"See you again on the stage!"

"Yeah. See you!"

Ringo and I saw off Ryden after he gave a cheerful salute and started walking towards his teammates.

"...on the stage, huh."

Ryden declared that he won't go easy on us, but sorry, we're almost guaranteed at least second place.

We have a grand total of 74 Goldens even though we missed the last two spawns. We might not be able to beat Hisame, but I can't imagine us losing to anyone else.

In fact, I remember Ryden saying "I've killed 21." If that's enough for third, then we won't need to worry about any of the other participants.

(Hmm...?)

For a moment, I felt that something seemed off, but I shook my head and returned to

reality.

It probably wasn't something I needed to worry about.

"Well then, shall we go?"

"...Mm."

Ringo, who had been accompanying us in silence, gave a short reply.

I don't know if she's shy or what, but Ringo really doesn't speak at all when others are around.

In retrospect, she doesn't speak all that much even when we're alone, so there might not be too much of a difference.

"Is it here?"

There was a special tent for reporting the results of the Extermination Fest. It was built so that nothing could be seen from the outside.

We still had around 30 minutes to spare, but there's nothing wrong with going earlier.

With that in mind, we approached the tent and some unfamiliar youngsters walked towards us.

"Yo! You guys were out there so long, must've worked your asses off, huh?"

They started acting familiar with us. From the way they looked I could tell that they were adventurers, but this was definitely our first time meeting them in this world. I couldn't remember their names since they weren't especially important characters in the game.

I was barely able to recall that they were adventurers from the capital and also characters that could be invited into your party after drilling my memory.

"Yeah, somewhat."

I wanted to tell them that we likely worked a hundred times harder than they could even imagine, but ranting at them won't accomplish anything. We're in the same

business, so we should try to establish a good relationship. The youngsters' fake smiles widened after hearing my neutral reply.

"It's good to be a hard worker... By the way, that person who was walking together with you, that was Ryden, wasn't it?"

"That's right, what about it?"

This was probably what they actually wanted to talk about.

I responded to the young adventurer's whispers at a normal volume.

However, those adventurers didn't seem to mind. They spoke even softer, as if scheming something.

"Just like we thought... So, how much did he give you?"

"Huh?"

Just what were these people suddenly asking about?

However, they completely ignored my reaction, and continued irritated.

"The coins, yo. He bought them off you, didn't he? We sold ours to Ryden's teammate for 30% extra, but I can't help but want to know how much other people got for them."

"W-Wait a moment!"

They were talking about something, but I didn't understand it. I didn't understand it, but I could tell that it wasn't good news for us.

(Come to think of it...)

Hearing the words "Ryden's teammate" just now made me realize what had felt off to me back then.

When we were talking about the number of Goldens defeated, Ryden had said "by the way, I've killed 21!" and voluntarily reported the number he defeated.

But if he had been defeating them together with his teammates, would he use the

pronoun 'I'?

—In that case, there was a chance that the number Ryden disclosed was not the total number Ryden's team defeated, but the total number that Ryden himself defeated.

To begin with, Ryden wouldn't boast about his own accomplishments. It was strange for him to divulge such information without being asked. If my reasoning is correct, then this Ryden is really someone not to be underestimated.

(I see. So had I been an afternoon snack for the Tea Drinker?)

Thinking of a bad joke, I found myself relaxing and pulled myself together.

I'm not competing against programmed puppets anymore. They're real, living humans with knowledge and intelligence. If I treat this like a game, I'll find my legs swept out from under me.

“Hey. So, how much...”

“Sorry, but could you go ask someone else? Bye.”

Dodging the hounding of the young adventurers, I entered the tent together with Ringo.

Inside the tent, someone who looked to be an employee of the Bounty Hunters' Guild was waiting.

“Are you a participant in the Extermination Fest? Please put the Fest crystal and collected items here.”

All that's left of this exceptionally hyped Extermination Fest was the announcement of results.

Finally, the Golden Wild Zlime Extermination Fest was drawing to a close.

We quickly left the tent after reporting our results.

I was slightly on guard in case those young adventurers were waiting to ambush us at the entrance, but it seems that they went away somewhere.

“...Phew.”

I heaved out a deep sigh.

I really do seem to get nervous when large sums of money are involved. I think I’ve developed some kind of a resistance to it after the whole Thief Melipe’s Legacy fiasco, but the amount at hand this time was of a totally different magnitude.

Never mind the crystal, it would’ve been a problem if even a single collection item were stolen, but now I don’t have to worry about it anymore. The moment we finished our report, I felt a weight being lifted off my shoulders.

Just defeating a Golden Wild Zlime already yields large amounts of gold and experience. Of course, completing a destroy or collect request increases the rewards manyfold. To be precise, each Golden defeated as part of a destroy request nets 10,000E, and a single one of their drops, the Gold Zlime Coin, is worth 100,000E when submitted as part of a collect request.

To put it in perspective, defeating a single one would let me stay 10 nights in that rip-off of an inn, or more than 6 nights if together with Ringo.

Or how about a whopping fifty of—everyone’s favorite—Fingerless Gloves... Defeating twenty of them would bring in more than the Thief Melipe’s Legacy was worth. Got an idea just how outrageous this was?

However, trying to run into a Golden Wild Zlime in the world was an extremely difficult task. Taking this into account, some advocated that 10,000E wasn’t even worth the search, so I should thank my luck that the Golden was chosen for mass spawning this time.

In the real world, one’d have to be wary of the Guild employees embezzling or attempting to withhold some of the prize money, but in this world, game mechanics

continue to function faithfully. I can't say with certainty, but I think it's likely that clerical errors or the guild refusing to pay the full amount won't happen in this world because they didn't happen in the game.

That's why I could feel relieved. Even on the off chance we didn't make it into the top three, we would almost certainly still receive such a large amount of money that we'd never have to worry about living costs again.

Even if we only got third, we'd still get 20,000E for each Golden killed and 200,000E for each Coin...

(Ahh, so that's what it was.)

I finally understood what those young adventurers were talking about, and what Ryden was plotting.

They talked about selling Coins, and of course those Coins were the collection items this time, the Gold Zlime Coins.

Normal participants can receive 100,000E for each Coin by ceding them to the Guild. However, what if Ryden and his team went around offering to buy them for 130,000E or 150,000E? Those participants who don't think they could make it into the top three would probably readily sell the coins to Ryden.

On the other hand, Ryden seems quite confident that his team is in the top three. The third, second, or first place get double, triple, and ten times the reward respectively. In other words, he's sure that each of his Coins can bring in at least 200,000E.

Even if he bought Coins from other teams at 150,000E each, he wouldn't lose any money. Rather, he's guaranteed to be able to make a net profit of at least 50,000E each.

And unlike the destroy request, where the monsters must be defeated by the contractor, no questions are asked as long as the items are delivered. This was true whether or not it was part of an Extermination Fest, whether the contractor received the item by defeating monsters after accepting the request, or they received the item from a third party like Ryden, or even if they already possessed the items before accepting the request. All methods of acquiring the specified items are fair game.

It's by no means against the rules to hand in drop items other people collected during a Fest.

He was trying to mislead me into underestimating the number of Goldens his team had defeated, while aiming for an upset by gathering drop items from the other participants.

You can call him experienced or just straight petty, but his tactics are well thought-out.

Then again, Ryden's personality was similar in the game. In serious situations where lives are at stake or in an encounter against a strong enemy, he exudes an air of manliness. Otherwise, you would expect him to be blending into the background, slacking off, or trying to pull off a get-rich-quick scheme. But some amazing person would always swoop in and beat him up in the middle of his ploy. He just can't seem to escape the role of the spoiler.

(Well, whatever.)

We managed to defeat seventy-four, so we weren't going to get overtaken by some shabby trickery. I wasn't planning on competing with Ryden in his Coin purchases anyways, so there was no point in thinking about it now.

There was really only a single person that we had to be on guard against.

"You sure took your sweet time. I was getting tired of waiting."

This female samurai, who was shooting us a cold gaze with her cat ears fluttering.

"...Souma."

With Hisame's sudden appearance, Ringo made her misgivings clear by casually pointing the tip of Golden Sakura at her. I replied provocatively while holding out my hand towards Ringo as if to break her line-of-sight.

"And you sure called it off quite early. I don't want to hear you complaining about how you could've won if you tried after you lose to us."

Hisame was expressionless, as usual, but her cat ears twitched.

"You need not worry about that. There is no way I can lose."

She spoke with incredible confidence, but sometimes confidence can be a fatal flaw. I replied as if trying to reason it to her.

“I’ve said this before, but it isn’t over until it’s over. Have you heard the story about the tortoise and the hare? While you were lazing around in town, we continued our hard work. That difference...”

“Does not matter. Even then, you will definitely lose.”

However, Hisame interrupted my speech.

I wondered if she had lost her cool thinking about her revenge, but her cat ears were still, and even drooping slightly. Turning them towards me, Hisame opened her mouth.

“I had just a bit of hope in you. That duel we had, the format was despicable, but I felt that you might have something that surpasses me.”

“Something?”

I parrotted it back, but Hisame didn’t explain further.

She merely shook her head and continued.

“However, it seems that I misjudged you. You said that you worked hard while I was resting. You may have tried your hardest after I returned to town. But it was already way too late at that point. You should have tried harder *before I finished*.”

Then, concluding what she came to say, she turned heel.

“The announcement will start soon. Everything will be made clear there.”

Neither Ringo nor I could say anything back to her as she walked away, leaving those words behind.

“Thanks for waiting, ladies and gentlemen. The Golden Wild Zlime Extermination Fest results announcement will now commence!”

The announcer’s magically amplified voice rang out in the plaza, now swarming with people.

There were more spectators than I expected—likely because large sums of money

involved with this event. It might also be the case that at least a few of the townspeople participated in the Golden hunt.

In either case, it was finally time to find out the results of the Extermination Fest.

“As you are all aware, the target of this Fest, the Golden Wild Zlime, is an extreeeemely valuable monster. I’m just a hired hand, so I don’t know for sure, but I heard today’s rewards crush all-time Fest historical records and are going to push the Guild to the brink of bankruptcy. Just which team is the victor of this Fest? And what will happen to the management of the Bounty Hunters’ Guild? We’ll find out very soon!”

The female announcer speaking onstage was a familiar face from the game.

Her light and flippant speech quickly fired up the crowd gathered in the plaza.

“Now then, let’s get down to business. I’m going to call our top three teams up to the stage, and announcing the eye-popping amounts of money they each will receive. Just who will these enviable teams be? When I call you, please give me a loud reply and come up on stage!”

The announcer’s instructions silenced the feverish plaza.

Some glanced around with curiosity in an attempt to determine who the lucky teams would be, while others clasped their hands together, praying to be called forward with their team.

There, the first team to be called was...

“Now for our first team. Team Ryden! Please make your way to the stage!”

The capable-looking pair followed behind Ryden as he stepped nonchalantly onto the stage. The crowd gave way, peering enviously at Ryden’s group.

Ryden’s team actually qualified, so we’re almost guaranteed to be called up there too.

My heart started pounding as the thought went through my mind.

Meanwhile, the next team to be called was...

“Our second team is, would you believe it, a single person! Miss Mitsuki Hisame, please

come up!"

It was Hisame.

She leapt out of the crowd and landed onto the stage. Her entry, though spectacular, was not a show of flamboyance. The way she bears herself just makes her stand out naturally.

As Hisame took the stage, cheers like "Whoo!" or "Kyaah!" or "Mitsuki-sama~!" could be heard. Surprisingly, Hisame was quite popular in this city.

Well, that was great and all but...

Now there was just a single spot left. Will we really be called up?

If everything was the same as the game, then there should be no problems, but what if there were some kind of issue that caused us to not be called...

As I was worrying myself over such possibilities...

"Finally, it's time for our last team."

The fateful time had come.

The last team the announcer announced was...

"Our final team is... Team Sagara! This team is also an uncommon two-person team. Now then, please come up on stage!"

It was us.

I was confident that we'd make it, but hearing our name relieved me. On the other hand, the sighs of those participants who were hoping for their team filled the air.

"Shall we, Ringo?"

It's fine to soak in the feeling of relief, but it's pointless to stand here. Ringo and I walked down the path that naturally opened up for us in the crowd.

"Yo. So you made it after all."

Waiting for us on stage were Ryden, grinning, and Hisame, aloof as usual.

I casually raised my hand in reply, and found my spot beside Hisame following the announcer's directions. Ringo was a former princess, but perhaps she didn't like being in front of people, as she quickly hid herself behind me.

"Let me introduce these three top teams once again. From the left is Team Ryden, Mitsuki Hisame, and Team Sagara."

After the three teams had entered the stage, it was time to explain the rules.

Once again, the announcer clearly explained how each enemy defeated was worth 10,000E, each Coin collected was worth 100,000E, and how each team's reward was to be multiplied. The third place team receives twice, the second place three times, and the first place ten times their rewards.

Of course, I had long since grown tired of hearing these explanations. I spent this time peeking at the other teams.

First, Ryden and his teammates.

I don't know what he thinks is so funny, but Ryden had been grinning since he made his way onstage, but his teammates didn't seem particularly worked up. This must be what a veteran adventurer feels like.

Next was Hisame, standing beside me.

She was expressionless and upright, maintaining a straight posture. Even the fluffy ears on her head proudly stood straight. She didn't seem nervous in the least.

Ringo was, well, frozen behind me like a statue, staring right at the back of my head. I don't think there's anything interesting to look at back there, but she's free to do whatever she wants. She's a contender for number one in the popularity rankings, so she'd inspire some cheers from the crowd if she were to just show herself...

(Ah, wait a moment.)

There were so many people watching this event, that if we somehow ended up taking first place, we'd definitely start turning heads as a two-person team with tons of money.

That might be kinda problematic... I thought as I started fantasizing out of boredom, when finally the announcer announced the start of the main event of the Fest.

“Now, for the moment you’ve all been waiting for! It’s time to begin the results announcement!”

“I’ll start from the left. First up is Team Ryden’s results!”

A drumroll followed suit, fanning the crowd’s anticipation.

As the excitement grew to a peak, the female announcer opened her mouth.

“Goldens defeated! 37! Coins collected! 11! Their total reward comes out to be... an impressive 1,470,000E!”

The crowd burst the moment the results came out of her mouth.

1,470,000E was an uncommon sum even for adventurers. That was even more so for the normal city dwellers.

But of course, Ryden’s team hadn’t assembled this extravagant bounty just from hunting.

Probabilistically, defeating thirty-seven Goldens should only yield around three or four Coins. It’s obvious that they bought Coins to finish with triple their expected yield. They showed brilliant entrepreneurship, considering that they wouldn’t have been able to buy any from Hisame, us, or any other team aiming for the podium.

However...

(We beat them!!)

Even then, they couldn’t reach us.

I was seriously worried for a moment, but it looks like we’re guaranteed second place at worst. The decider would be just how many Goldens Hisame managed to defeat.

“Team Ryden is our current top-place team. Will either of the two teams be able to beat their score of 1,470,000E?”

There was no question about it, of course. The announcer was just trying to rouse up the crowd.

I'm sure that just about everyone here knew that.

"Then, next, I shall reveal Miss Mitsuki Hisame's total."

At that moment, an even greater commotion enveloped the stage.

"Miss Mitsuki Hisame is, as you're all aware, an amazingly skilled adventurer. But just how many Golden Wild Zlimes did she bury under a swing of her sword? Even I can't wait to find out!"

She probably knew the results already, but the announcer continued stirring the crowd.

The cheering grew louder in response.

Then...

"Then, then then then, let us finally reveal Miss Hisame's reward!!"

Will we clinch victory, or will Hisame?

It will all be revealed in the next few seconds.

"Miss Mitsuki Hisame's results are..."

I perked up my ears and waited.

Before I noticed, the raucous audience had closed their mouths, and a nervous silence had taken over, a silence so quiet that it hurt the ears.

Ringo was muttering while looking at the back of my head. "...Ah, split ends," rang out clearly in my ears.

And then, finally...

"251 Goldens defeated! 52 Coins collected! For a total reward of 7,710,000E!! She blew straight past Ryden's team! She's currently in first place!"

The crowd was rapturous after hearing results that surpassed their expectations.

In contrast, I slowly heaved a sigh, shoulders sagging.

(I see. Over half, huh.)

To be fair, this wasn't completely beyond my predictions.

Hisame very distinctly used the word "finished". This implies that she defeated more than half, that is, 251 of the 500 Golden Wild Zlimes that spawned. Following this, competing teams would only be able to defeat a maximum of 249 Goldens.

In addition, each time Hisame defeated a Golden, she aimed for its critical point, doubling the drop rate of the Coins. Even if another team were to defeat a similar amount of Goldens, slaying them any other way would leave an insurmountable gap in Coins.

Hisame's usage of "finished" meant that she had ensured her own victory.

Even if someone realized this, it just wasn't possible for a normal person to defeat an extraordinary 251 Goldens. Not to mention that she managed it all by herself, without forming a team. "Skilled" can't be used to describe this.

(She's really something, that girl.)

No matter how much I levelled up in the future, I'm sure that I still wouldn't be able to manage such a feat.

Given the situation, I was starting to think that maybe I should just sincerely praise her for her accomplishment.

"And defeating 251 monsters sets a new Extermination Fest record! It completely trumps the old record of 150. Please give her another large round of applause for this phenomenal feat!"

So the announcer said, disturbing the crowd again. But I had already stopped paying attention.

(...It's all over.)

The outcome was clear. I didn't even need to hear our results, and the audience wasn't listening either.

“E-Everyone! There’s still one team left! Everyone, please quiet down!”

She probably hadn’t expected this to get so out of hand.

In a panic, the announcer attempted to wrestle control of the crowd again, but there were no signs of a positive result.

The crowd was uncontrollable. To make matters worse, from each and every corner...

“Hisame! Hisame! Hisame!”

Calls of “Hisame!” erupted.

“F-Finally!! I’ll now announce!! The third group!! The results for Team Sagara!!”

Having given up on calming the crowd, the announcer pressed forward with her announcement, yelling at the top of her lungs.

I glanced sideways at Hisame while listening to the announcer’s desperate yelling.

And then...

“Defeated, 87!! Collected, 74!! Total, 8,270,000E!! Team Sagara is the winner!! Congratulaaaaations!!!!”

The unexpected result completely quieted the stage. I continued looking at Hisame, who stood dumbfounded.

See? Now do you understand, Hisame?

—This is the power of someone (exploiting bugs) who doesn’t give up until the very end!!

Epilogue

— 1 —

Nekomimineko players live alongside bugs. They can be our biggest enemies, and they can also be our greatest friends.

The bug I exploited this time, of course, was a great friend.

It's been described as the most convenient and exploitable bug in the history of Nekomimineko. Rumor would always have it that this bug would be fixed "when the new patch came out," but lo and behold, it has remained present in every single patch since release.

—It was called the "Corpse Knocking Bug".

Attacking a monster's critical point doubles its drop rates. This is one of Nekomimineko's game mechanics, and even the NPCs knew about it.

It's definitely a useful mechanic, but for many monsters, these points can't be targeted reliably because of their high agility or awkward positioning.

But at some point, a person insisted that finishing off a monster by hitting its critical point with a multi-hit skill causes the drop rate to skyrocket.

If this was true, then it would completely change how players fought against monsters with useful drops. Inevitably, a large number of players set out to verify this.

The general consensus among testers showed that "the theory was inexplicably correct." However, results varied greatly from person to person, and no good conclusion could be drawn. But it was clear that using a high damage skill with many hits increases item drop chances.

However, the unbelievable testament of a certain player who attempted to verify the bug caused a dramatic development in the situation.

They claimed that they mis-timed a multi-hit skill and landed it *after the target had already died*. But even then, the drop rate increased. In fact, after further testing, they saw a higher increase in drop rates over the previous method.

The moment this finding was published, the player base responded with a resounding “it can’t be...”

“...But it’s Nekomimineko so it might just...”

And thus, the verification started again in a new direction. It ended up shedding light on an astonishing truth.

To begin, how did the game interpret “killing a monster by attacking its critical point doubles its drop rate,” and how was that implemented? The answer was apparently: when “the critical point is hit by an attack,” and “after damage calculation, the monster has less than or equal to zero HP,” then “double the chance of a drop or rare drop.”

This might seem quite standard, and in any normal RPG, or really any other game, there wouldn’t be a problem. The moment the final hit drops the monster’s HP to 0, the monster would become untargetable, and it wouldn’t matter whether a multi-hit skill dealt the killing blow or not. There would only be one final hit and one doubling of drop rates.

But in Nekomimineko, actions can affect monsters’ corpses for a short while after they die. This means that players can be killed by those corpses’ attacks, but on the other hand, this also meant that it was possible to land hits on dead monsters.

Of course, it’s easier to attack the critical point of a corpse versus the vital point of a moving monster. Plus since it’s dead, its HP would always be below zero, no matter how weak of an attack it’s hit with. All this considered, each hit on a corpse’s critical point fulfills all requirements to double the drop rate.

Finally, the drop rate increase is a simple multiplication by two, so with each cumulative hit, the drop rate increases to 2x, 4x, 8x, etc. at an exponential rate.

What does this all mean?

—In essence, “hitting the vital point of a monster’s corpse with a multi-hit skill increases item drop rates exponentially.”

This was the “Corpse Knocking Bug”, obtaining more drops with little risk. It’s one of the bread and butter bug techniques of Nekomimineko players.

Now, in this tournament, the ranking will largely depend on the amount of rewards obtained from drop items.

There’s no way I wouldn’t use the bug here. I had been forming a plan around this bug from the moment this Golden Extermination Fest was announced.

“After Ringo halted them with her lightning strikes, I would dash in and hit them in the vitals with Sextuple Stab. We’d aim for first place with that approach, and if there were room to spare I’d have Ringo hold back slightly on her attacks so that I could deal the killing blow and raise my level. This was our basic strategy against the Golden Wild Zlimes.”

It was exactly as I had said.

To explain it in slightly more detail, after Ringo killed the Golden with her lightning strikes and stopped it from moving, I would dash in and trigger the bug with Sextuple Stab. The Golden was then almost guaranteed to drop a Gold Zlime Coin, and we would aim for first place with the drop rewards.

The skill Sextuple Stab is six hits, so when using it to trigger the Corpse Knocking Bug, the item drop rate increases by 2^6 times. That was $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 64$ times the regular drop rate. The drop rate for Gold Zlime Coins was originally 10%, so by using this bug the drop rate increases to 640%. Unfortunately, the system wasn’t so broken that it would drop multiple items at once, but it was more than enough to guarantee a drop.

But there was one thing that I had missed at the start. This Corpse Knocking Bug actually had one small defect when the goal is to win this Fest, and that is that this trick also raises the rare drop rate.

Since rare drops supercede normal drops, the Gold Zlime Coin would not drop when the system decides to drop a rare item. The Golden’s rare drop, Golden Sakura, had a 0.1% drop rate, so after the Corpse Knocking Bug, it would have a 6.4% drop rate. Going by expected values, it would’ve been completely normal if we had gotten another three or so, but in the end we were lucky—or maybe unlucky—and only a single Golden Sakura dropped.

However, I did make yet another miscalculation.

That was Hisame's participation.

From the very start, I hadn't expected to be able to take first place in kills. The occurrence of this event was random, but this was still a Nekomimineko event. Even if I hadn't imagined Hisame would show up, I had anticipated that some skilled characters would be competing.

But no matter how skilled they are, I thought that I would be able to overtake them with the difference in expected value per Golden we gained.

Normally, defeating a Golden yields 10,000, and the drop item is worth 100,000 with a 10% chance resulting in an expected 10,000, for a total expected value of 20,000 per Golden. We, on the other hand, can almost guarantee Coin drops, resulting in 10,000 for a kill and 100,000 for the drop, totaling a guaranteed 110,000 per Golden. The difference is huge.

Earlier, I had set a kill quota for us to meet, but in fact, the quota also included Gold Zlime Coins obtained by Corpse Knocking.

If our main competition only defeated the Goldens normally, then we only needed to defeat 80 Goldens using the bug to secure our lead. Even if they defeated the remaining 420, we'd be guaranteed first place. If we defeated at least 50, then they would have to defeat 275 Goldens, or more than half of the total, which means we had a good chance to take first. That's what I had thought.

However, Hisame was a monster who could accurately target the critical point every time, earning her an expected 30,000 per Golden.

This caused my safe estimates to no longer be so safe. What's more, from how she spoke, it seemed likely that she would hunt more than half.

An hour into the event, we had a total of 66 successes using the Corpse Knocking Bug. That corresponds to a reward of around 7,300,000, which was still short of the anticipated 7,500,000 if Hisame made good on her word. At that moment, I was at my wit's end, and in actuality Hisame had defeated 251 Goldens and was sitting at 7,710,000.

If we hadn't found the spawn point in the giant boulder at that time, or if Hisame had

continued hunting past the 251th one, we surely would have lost.

Looking at it that way, this was indeed “a victory gained by not giving up.”

(Mhm. This was quite a tight battle.)

That was how I reflected on this Fest as Ringo and I were being recognized as the winners.

Nobody accused us of cheating, probably because this world is half a game world, despite our obviously ludicrous results. I’m sure that everyone understands it’s impossible to break the rules of the Fest.

The stage had gone quiet for a moment after our results had been revealed, perhaps out of shock. But after the announcer reported our victory once more, loud cheering and words of congratulations poured over us. Though Nekomimineko was filled with extremely evil events, another of its peculiarities was that there were many good people in it.

...Of course that was just another of the producers’ schemes, since having someone with no ill intentions trigger the most horrible events serves to bring further pain to the players.

In any case, it felt great to be praised. A natural smile appeared even on my face, as I waved back to everyone who had sent us their compliments, which included everyone around this stage.

(...Wait, not quite.)

It was incorrect to say everyone. While almost everyone was cheering for us, at the very minimum, there was one exception.

That exception, was of course...

“...Im...possible.”

Her emotions had completely disappeared, and she appeared to have entered a catatonic state. Her cat ears were slumped over and dead still.

Dissemination of rewards came after the award ceremony. However, the organizers explained to us that it would be difficult for them to pay us what we were owed for our first place result, given the amount involved. They wanted us to head over to the Bounty Hunters' Guild headquarters instead.

I was slightly alarmed at this development, since it wasn't in the game...

"I'm sure they have to prepare for you at the headquarters, so please take your time!"

So they said, and from their courteous attitude, it didn't seem like the Guild was trying to shirk the bill.

As suggested, we took our time and wandered around the city for a bit before heading over to the Guild to receive our payment.

We leisurely strolled through the streets while thinking about what we'd buy after getting our hands on all that reward money,

Various wants and needs wandered through my mind, one after another, quickly lifting my mood.

"Hey Ringo, is there anything you want? Once we cash out we can buy anything."

I asked cheerfully, and Ringo pointed to a nearby stall with zero hesitation.

"...That."

For sale there were familiar red fruits from which Ringo had gotten her name. Apples.

A wry smile formed on my face. We didn't even need the reward to buy something like this.

"...Here."

I went and bought an apple from the shop and handed it to her.

"That's not what I'm talking about. Don't you have anything more expensive than you

want? I mean, we're going to be splitting the reward 50-50."

I wasn't really expecting much of a reaction from Ringo of all people, but contrary to my expectations, Ringo shook her head.

"...I don't need it. Souma, you can have it all."

For a moment, I couldn't understand what she had just said.

"H-Hey! It's 80 million, a whole 80 million! Even if we split it evenly that's 40 million! With that much money, it doesn't matter if you want to adventure or just live out your life, you..."

I frantically tried to explain, but Ringo, with her usual thousand-yard stare, calmly replied.

"...It's okay. You seem to know more about these things, Souma."

"What do you even mean by that!? And don't you have things you want to buy too, like weapons or armor..."

However, Ringo adamantly insisted.

"I'll have you buy everything."

She boldly announced her plan to extort me.

But, that would mean...

"Which means you'll continue sticking with me?"

Hearing my question, Ringo finally looked me in the eyes.

"...A bother?"

Ringo wore her familiar expressionless look, but I thought I saw her eyes wavering slightly.

—I wonder just how it is.

I thought seriously about this question, which I had turned a blind eye to until now.

Reflecting back on all the time I spent with Ringo and what I had felt then, I reached a surprising conclusion.

“—No, you’re not a bother.”

Thinking back, I didn’t feel uncomfortable having Ringo by my side, and I’m a loner to the core.

That was probably because of Ringo’s extreme lack of initiative. It’s strange how scant her existence is for such a unique person. But seriously, when she has nothing to do, when there’s no need for her to do anything, she does just absolutely nothing. She just stands there, spaced out, staring straight ahead at nothing in particular.

This behavior would be particularly abnormal—or even scary—if she were on Earth, it perfectly suited me. It’s difficult to explain, but even though fundamentally I prefer being by myself, being with her isn’t a pain.

Not to mention—

“You really saved me in that fight with the Butcher, Ringo. If you hadn’t been there, I definitely would’ve been killed just like that.”

That time, Ringo had saved me.

On the surface, Ringo bought me time to recover my strength. But in the end, I was only able to face the Butcher because Ringo’s actions became the stimulus I needed to muster my strength.

Now that I think about it, I had similar experiences when I played this game in a party. It was often the case that I was about to reset the game when the sight of Eddie, Merlin, and Tieru valiantly struggling gave me the courage that was needed to turn the fight around.

“It might not be so bad to try forming a party again.”

The moment I muttered that, for some reason, Ina’s face — Train Girl, whom I had left behind in Ramlich — flashed through my mind.

I couldn't imagine Train Girl being able to survive the adventures that lay ahead, so I more or less tricked her into staying behind in Ramlich.

I don't regret that decision. Even if I reconsidered it, that was the only possible conclusion. It might be selfish of me, but even now I truly believe that she'll be happier this way.

So I wasn't able to stop myself from superimposing Train Girl's silhouette on top of Ringo after seeing her wholeheartedly trying to stay with me. I ask her a question impulsively..

"Are you sure about this, Ringo? Going forward, I'll probably be dragged into a lot of dangerous situations. If you take the 40 million today, you can probably live safely in this city for the rest..."

But, Ringo immediately shook her head.

And this is what she replied.

"Without me, you'll probably get yourself killed right away..."

I couldn't help but burst out laughing after being blindsided by her words.

(Jeez. If she's gonna put it that way, then what can I say?)

In that moment, I made up my mind.

"Ringo!"

I forcefully yelled out her name, and extended my right hand towards her.

For a while, Ringo stared at me, trying to grasp my intent, but finally a bulb seemed to have gone off in her head.

"...Sou-ma."

Could she be... nervous?

Ringo behaved almost like a frightened child as she timidly reached her hand toward mine.

And then I felt a soft and moist sensation in my right hand.

“—!”

In that instant, I lost my words.

We just looked at each other.

Our gaze met.

“No, sorry, Ringo—”

Then, slowly...

Very slowly, I dropped my gaze towards the right hand that Ringo had touched.

“—that’s not what I meant.”

Still outstretched, in my hand was a single polished apple core lying on its side.

Ringo is really quite an awkward name, I thought to myself.

— 3 —

I direct a question at the first *companion* I made since I came to this world as I walk with her.

“Hey Ringo, I really think you should rethink your name. Now, I know you really like apples, but there’s really no need to go and name yourself after a food item.”

To be perfectly honest, I was already starting to get used to Ringo’s name.

It might be a bit awkward to change her name now, but moving forward, it’s important that she changes her name sooner rather than later—should she choose to do so.

“...Ringo is good.”

Ringo stubbornly insisted.

“But a name’s gonna stick with you for a whole lifetime. Such a random name...”

“...It’s not random.”

Ringo suddenly took a step-and-a-half forward, pulling alongside me.

Then, from a close distance reminiscent of when we first met, she declared.

“...You said that Ringo suits me.”

“.....ah.”

A memory hit me like a flash of lightning. Indeed, I remember saying those words right after I met her when she was eating some apples. I didn’t expect those words to leave such a deep impression on her, and I couldn’t even imagine that it would be the trigger for her to decide her name.

Ah, I get it. That’s what she meant when she said I named her a while back.

Of course, when I said those words, they were just a reaction to the image of Princess Shelmia eating an apple, and I simply meant that the sight of her eating apples was quite befitting, and not that Ringo was a suitable name, so in the end it was a misunderstanding on her part...

But, for some strange reason, hearing Ringo say that didn't feel so bad.

My face felt hot, and I was barely able to stop myself from breaking into a grin.

I thought about confirming with her once again whether she was really okay with throwing away the name Shelmia, but gave up.

I came to understand how uncharacteristically stubborn she could be after the Butcher fight. There's no point in forcing this issue.

In any case, this was one thing off my plate.

This Extermination Fest, which began due to poverty, ended with an unbelievable development, and had an unexpected boss monster sandwiched between the two, was conclusively over.

“Well, let's get going then, Ringo.”

“...Mm.”

I set off in search of a new adventure together with my new and irreplaceable partner...

“—Please wait!”

We then heard those words—words that would overturn everything.

“Hisa-me...?”

She couldn't be here to dispute the results of the contest, could she?

Considering that, I stepped forward to shelter Ringo, but I was met with an unexpected sight.

“I have a request to make of you.”

Hisame bowed deeply to follow her words.

“Eh? A, requests...?”

I froze as I was confronted with such an unforeseen situation, while Hisame continued to speak with her head still lowered.

“I promise you the greatest hospitality in the world, unmatched in all aspects. Hence—”

A shiver of unprecedented scale crawled up my spine, together with an overwhelming sense of *deja vu*.

This was—these phrases were...

“—Would you be interested in studying at my dojo as a guest in exchange for your strength?”

The words that heralded the beginning of the worst chain of *insta-death* events, “The Hisame Family’s Trials.”

I Am the Only One Who Knows This World Is a Game 2 (End)



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